



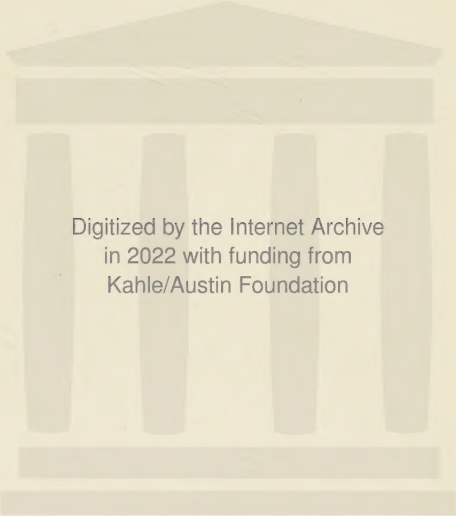
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HANDBOOKS  
OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE  
EDITED BY PROFESSOR HALES:  
THE AGE OF CHAUCER

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THE  
AGE OF CHAUCER

(1346-1400)

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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## PREFACE.

IN compiling the present work the author has attempted to lay under contribution the labours of his predecessors in the same field, availing himself of the newest lights, but not wholly neglecting the old. Thus, while he has leant heavily on Professor Skeat, as every student of the period must, he has not quite forgotten Tyrwhitt. The industry of foreign scholars also has been made to promote whatever utility the *Age of Chaucer* may be considered to possess—for example, Ten Brink. With regard to *Piers Plowman*, M. Jusserand's careful and charming *L'Épopée Mystique de William Langland* has been found invaluable; and other writings of the same author have been advantageously consulted. The writer's obligations have been, in general, acknowledged in the text, and therefore need not be recapitulated further. He must, however, record his warm appreciation of Professor Hales's courtesy and helpfulness. Without his wise counsel it is certain the book would have been far more imperfect. Although the contrast may operate to his disadvantage, the author feels a special pleasure in the inclusion of a full introduction by Mr. Hales, inasmuch as Mr. Hales's edition of Milton's *Areopagitica* was his present collaborator's first real lesson in English literature.

It will be noticed that, as regards quotations, endeavours have been made to modernize the spelling so as to render the sense more easily comprehensible. Provided that the scansion be clearly indicated, perhaps it would be expedient that our early poets should be treated in the same way as Shakespeare and Milton. It seems undesirable that the pleasure of perusal should be neutralized by a too rigid conservatism in the matter of orthography. At the same time, textual accuracy will always be esteemed by mature scholars, and therefore the specimens quoted in the Introduction are given exactly as they stand in the MSS.

TIVERTON, N. DEVON.

*July 26th, 1901.*



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## INTRODUCTION.

IN the eighteenth century and for a great part of the nineteenth, it was common to speak of Chaucer as 'The Father of English Poetry,' in the sense that he was the first chronologically of English poets; that is, it was thought that English poetry began with Chaucer! Such a title is no longer claimed for him, however great his distinction, and however clearly his work made an epoch in literary history. A more intelligent use of the term English, which has been urged, and urged with success, by eminent historians and eminent scholars in other departments of learning, and yet more, an increasing knowledge of our oldest literary remains, have made it nearly obsolete and likely soon to be entirely so. We have discovered and realized that to sever our late from our early medieval literature—to speak as if there was a great gulf fixed between the poetry of the eighth century and the poetry of the fourteenth—is altogether misleading and obscuring. We have recognized qualities and characteristics and even forms that are common to these two periods, and that the one is in fact the descendant of the other, though the varying fortunes of the English race during the interval between them have undoubtedly, as was inevitable, produced some considerable changes. The post-Norman-Conquest Englishman was after all essentially the same being as the pre-Norman-Conquest Englishman. How could it be otherwise? His nature, however modified, was certainly not fundamentally altered. The same Teutonic blood ran in

his veins as ran in the veins of the older generations. The blood of his conquerors was of the same elements as his own, for it too was Teutonic. New standards of style, new models of form, new fashions of speech had come into vogue, and unquestionably a new literary era had commenced; but to say that the Englishman was after the Norman Conquest made into a quite new creature, that he forgot altogether his ancient self, and broke away for ever from his past and all its ways and traditions—how can any such things be said by anyone who knows human nature, and particularly the English nature, or who studies with intelligence and industry what literary records have come down to us of the centuries that immediately followed the Norman Conquest and the unmistakable indications there are of a continuous vernacular poetry which, being only oral, has unhappily perished? It was no inexplicable resurrection from the dead that took place when the old alliterative poetry was again current in the time of Chaucer; it had been living all along, though so few of its notes have been preserved. And poets that did not affect the old national versification, but for the most part embraced the new modes, such as Chaucer himself, they too are not unlinked to the older days of their nation. Chaucer is the heir of all the preceding English ages. His metres and his language are wonderfully different from those of the early Middle Ages in England, but they have become different by a gradual steady process of evolution profoundly modified by Norman-French influences. He is the great spokesman of the England of his time; but that England is beyond controversy an England developed from its older self slowly and consistently—an England that has absorbed and assimilated large importations both of thought and of expression, but has never forsworn its ancestry or dreamt of any such abandonment.

Indeed the life of England and the literature that represents and interprets that life know no interruption of continuity, however dissimilar different periods may look. As one reads the death of Beowulf, one inevitably recalls the death of Nelson. And in this year of his millenary do we not feel that as a people we are one with King Alfred—bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh—and that he represents what is noblest and best in our race, and what has won for our country so large a part of its real greatness and its true glory, as distinguished from all wild pretences and insignificant, however gaudy, shows? That wonderful inability to know when we are beaten, that obstinate resistance of the direst circumstances, that enduring patience and fortitude which King Alfred exhibited in his darkest hour amidst the marshes of Athelney, are amongst the permanent and the most excellent characteristics of those who came and have come after him. The succession is unbroken. To speak of Chaucer as chronologically the first of English Poets is equivalent to denying the name of Englishman to King Alfred.

Chaucer is in fact the supreme poet of the Middle English period, *i.e.*, of the Middle Ages in their fullest and ripest phase, when our literature put forth flowers as fair as it was possible for it to produce in such an environment, a long century before the Revival of Learning and before the Protestant Reformation. Of both these momentous movements there were beginnings in Chaucer's time; and obvious signs of them are visible in both the poetry and the prose of it. But he is not their prophet—not the exponent of modern English ideas—but the reflector of the medieval mind, born and bred and matured in the atmosphere of chivalry and the world of which chivalry was the predominant mode and fashion.

The author of *Beowulf*, Cynewulf, Chaucer, Spenser,

Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, are all glorious figures in one and the same gallery. If we may compare our poetical literature to a great mountain chain, we may say that the first and one of the finest of its peaks is he who wrote the noble epic of *Beowulf*—the original author, though it may be others of note expanded the primary poem; and in the neighbourhood of this peak rise others also nameless, but yet conspicuous from far, as well as at least one that can happily be named. Such poems as the *Battle of Brunanburh* and the *Battle of Maldon* rise to no mean elevation a little later. And then comes a long depression in our mountain chain—by no means its only depression; mists also lie thick on it. But we know the range runs on; we know that English poetry was not extinct, though but little survives; we are certain there was no lack of oral songs; we are acquainted with some of their themes. Then in the thirteenth century we can see the great ridge once more rearing itself, and in the fourteenth it rises to a lofty height, with many considerable eminences all round it. This is the peak of Chaucer, and the lesser summits belong to the poet who wrote *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight*, to Langland, to Gower (this very much lower than its neighbours). Then comes another long depression—well on to two centuries long. And then again the mountainous mass raises itself, and we behold the most magnificent Oberland of all English literature; there are peaks more than can be told; and amongst them some that soar up into the skies, one of them, at least, in ‘the highest heaven of invention.’ These are our ‘Delectable Mountains’; they form for us a divine Highlands. But again the range sinks, and we have yet another depression lasting some century and a half, *i.e.* (to mix reality and allegory), from the Restoration to the French Revolution. But even here there are hills of



notable altitude, though none sky-kissing. Then yet a fourth time the ridge ascends, and we have before us yet another Alpine prospect, though less lofty than the preceding one. Heights tower before us in marvellous abundance and variety, and the stars seem to bedeck their aspiring foreheads. These represent the great poets of the nineteenth century from Wordsworth and Shelley to Tennyson and Browning. And then it will appear that the ridge yet again sinks and subsides; and another depression begins, the end of which who of us that are now living can foresee? No doubt it will end some time, and in an age enriched with new ideas that need embodiment, and quickened with new impulses and aspirations, poetic genius of the higher or highest order will have a fresh incarnation; *i.e.*, to return to our metaphor, the mountain ridge will once more rear itself aloft, and Alps on Alps arise yet again. Thus, to lay aside all tropes and figures, the history of our poetry is continuous from the eighth—perhaps we might confidently say the seventh—century; and Chaucer is not the Father of English poetry, but only its great medieval representative.

No analysis is yet able, or seems likely, to explain what is the genesis of genius. The researches of science make it perhaps no longer accurate to say that ‘the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth’; but certainly those words still largely apply to him that is ‘born of the spirit,’ if in the present context we may take that phrase to denote a man of genius. As to how Chaucer came to be possessed of genius we can no more render a reason than as to how Shakespeare came to be so possessed. We have to rest content with the fact. We can only say that he was born with this celestial endowment; certainly nothing that was done for him in the way of education or

nurture brought it to him. But we are able to study the circumstances amidst which this child of such an exquisite faculty was reared, and their conceivable effect upon him in awakening and exciting his interest in the world around him, and providing him with matter on which his fine artistic power might presently work, to transmute it into shapes of imperishable beauty. Geniuses, if they exist, assuredly do not thrive in mean and frivolous times. Great poets belong to great ages—ages quick with the spirit of enterprise, of noble daring, of independence and freedom—ages of new conceptions and designs, various activities and movements, of social and political advances, of scarcely defined hopes and dreams, never perhaps doomed to be fulfilled, but yet of beneficent use in keeping men's hearts alive and eager for fresh endeavours.

Such an age certainly was the age of Chaucer. It was a notable epoch in the history of England. It is the most brilliant period of the Middle Ages, which were then about to pass away. The country had been going through a certain transformation that was now complete, and so was arrived at a well-marked stage in its development, from which a new career was to be begun. With a new sense of consolidation and unity, it was becoming conscious of new possibilities and of a fresh importance and power. It was becoming great, strong, aspiring.

The amalgamation of the Norman-French conquerors with the conquered began very shortly after the Norman-French conquest; but its completion was a work of several generations. In the thirteenth century, in the Wars of the Barons, we see that the two races were drawing close together and could already combine for a common cause. But their entire unification is not fully exhibited till the commencement of the Hundred Years' War. Then at last, and for the first time, we have England presenting a solid

front to the world—no longer a house divided against itself—that kind of house which cannot stand—but a well-cemented, firm-based structure, four-square against any winds that might blow. Knights of the shire and burgesses from the towns—gentlemen and tradesmen—sit side by side in one house. And on the battle-field the lord and the yeoman share the hardships and the glories of the campaign, and are bound to each other by a genuine comradeship. That fatal severance between the classes and the masses, which has produced such disastrous results elsewhere, was happily never effected or unconsciously instituted in England. Chaucer paints both the knight and the yeoman amongst his Canterbury Pilgrims; each is an essential member of the society of the time. Crecy and Poitiers were the common soldiers' battles rather than the battles of the chivalry. Never was more thoroughly justified the time-honoured adage that 'unity is strength.' The splendid triumphs of England then, as at many another crisis, were due to the complete co-operation of the whole body politic. We were invincible, being undistracted by internal discords and enmities, and rallying like one man under the royal banner. As to the righteousness of the French wars of Edward III., modern judgment is very different from that of former days. To us they are apt to seem quite unjustifiable, and deserving to be cordially denounced. But it must be remembered that ideas on the subject were not then as now—that the standpoint of the fourteenth century was far apart from that of the twentieth. What, however, now concerns us is not the abstract defensibility of those Edwardian raids, but, it being borne in mind that they did not then offend people's conscience, what was their effect on the national mind and spirit. It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good; and schemes that are really

perverse and mischievous may, if apparently just and patriotic, quicken and stimulate the pulses of a nation. Assuredly fortitude and courage were never on any field more abundantly displayed than at Crecy and Poitiers. As we watch those conflicts, we forget all about the causes from which they have arisen; we think nothing of lawless ambitions, of preposterous claims, of countries lying or to lie waste and exhausted. We think only of the tremendous odds—how a mere handful of men is calmly and resolutely facing a host, and of the splendid valour and the inflexible will that makes each individual a troop in himself. We see how at least one side of the English character fully revealed itself, and how the English race gained faith and confidence in itself by the record of these revelations—how the deeds of bravery and prowess there enacted were to serve ever afterwards as an inspiring example of how Englishmen should demean themselves when in the direst straits with no hope outside themselves—no hope but in their own strong arms and their own stout hearts.

It was then in an England buoyant with a fresh sense of capacity and strength, and eager for opportunities to gratify this new sense—an England strenuous and jubilant, proud of itself, alert, sanguine—that Chaucer was born in or about the year 1340. He lived to the end of the century; and long before that end came the English skies had changed. Great troubles soon befell the England of his boyhood and youth. There was the Black Death in 1349, which according to the more moderate estimate destroyed about half the population; then presently the inevitable consequences of such costly wars of aggression as those of Edward III. in France made themselves felt; then we have the melancholy picture of the warrior-king in his dotage, dying lonely and forlorn:

‘Mighty victor, mighty lord!  
Low on his funeral couch he lies!  
No pitying heart, no eye, afford  
A tear to grace his obsequies’;

then we are reminded that ‘Woe is the land with a youth for its Prince,’ and the almost incessant discords and tumults of Richard II.’s reign set in; and it is only with the abdication of this sport of fortune—this wilful, impetuous prodigal—that peace is once more, for a time at least, established. Thus Chaucer’s life covers a singularly chequered period of English history; and he had his full share of its adversities; but if the rain fell on him, the sun shone also, especially in his earlier years. And we must remember that these earlier years were coincident with that epoch of national triumph and exultation which we have described above. No doubt Chaucer’s feeling about his age was to the end coloured by the memories of his youth, which would be ineffaceably impressed on a nature so quick and sensitive. Of all lives the earlier years are those of the highest importance, as for the most part determining the direction of a man’s interests and sympathies, and giving things a colour they never entirely lose. The ideas that first tenant a child’s mind are not easy to eject, and in fact are seldom ejected. Whatever notions arrive afterwards find the premises already fully occupied, and often can find but little room:

‘The childhood shows the man,  
As morning shows the day.’

For Chaucer, probably enough, his country never lost the brightness which distinguished it in his infancy and boyhood, when its fame was at its highest—the period of the battles of Sluys, of Crecy, of Winchelsea, or L’Espagnols

sur Mer—and by temperament he was not given to desponding and melancholy views of things :

‘A merry heart goes all the day,  
Your sad tires in a mile-a.’

And Chaucer’s was a ‘merry heart,’ and seems to have grown merrier as he grew older; certainly in his literary career his humour, not lively in his earliest extant writings, becomes more and more conspicuous, and his power of humorous expression more and more masterly. He inclines to tears rather than laughter in his immature pieces—to the habit of Heraclitus rather than that of Democritus—to sad and pathetic stories, such as those of Griselda and Constance. It is comparatively late in his life that his wonderful gift of comedy freely unfolds itself. Not till he was about fifty did he produce his masterpieces in this line, and stand out as the first great English humorist. He declined to take things so very seriously. Perhaps he despaired of the Court society of which King Richard was the central figure; or at all events found in it little or no response to his graver thoughts—little or no care for any tragic presentment of the world and its ways. It was a time of unbounded frivolity and the wantonest extravagance, when all steady and sober citizens, such as Gower, were beginning to loosen their allegiance to one who was evidently bringing the country to ruin and anarchy, and were looking round for some saviour of society to whom to attach themselves; and, seeing him in Henry of Bolingbroke, Gower spoke with no uncertain voice, and acted accordingly. In 1393-4 he cancelled the dedication of his *Confessio Amantis* to King Richard, written probably some three or four years before—cancelled such loyal words as these :

‘And for that fewe men endite  
In oure Englisshe, I thenke make



A bok for King Richardes sake,  
 To whom belongeth my ligeance  
 With al myn hertes obeisance  
 In al that evere a liege man  
 Unto his king may doon or can.  
 So ferforth I me recommande  
 To him which al me may commande,  
 Preyende unto the hihe regne  
 Which causeth every kinge to regne  
 That his corone longe stonde.'

In the revised edition—the edition of the sixteenth year of King Richard—he writes simply that he thinks to make

'A bok for Engelondes sake'—

a very significant alteration; and instead of any phrases of homage, he gives no obscure hint of his patriotic misgivings and fears:

'What schal be'alle hiereafterward  
 God wot, for now upon this tyde  
 Men se the world on every syde  
 In sondry wyse so diversed  
 That it welnyh stant al reversed.'

And even Chaucer, in whose nature there was no inclination to censoriousness, or to a reformer's part—even Chaucer could not but lift up his voice in admonishment and warning. He, too, sees all is being lost 'for lack of stedfastness':

'Trouthe is put down; resoun is holden fable  
 Vertu hath now no dominacioun;  
 Pitee exyled, no man is merciable;  
 Throug covetyse is blent discrecioun;  
 The world hath mad a permutacioun  
 Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fickelnesse,  
 That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse.'

Such is the terrible refrain of his song. All is lost because a capricious and infirm hand holds the sceptre. And he directly and frankly appeals to the misguided monarch to alter his course :

‘O prince, desyre for to be honourable!  
 Cherish thy folk, and hate extorcioun!  
 Suffre no thing that may be reprevable  
 To thyn estat don in thy regioun.  
 Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun!  
 Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthynesse,  
 And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse.’

This was plain speaking enough; and disorder must have reached a pretty pass before so closely attached a courtier and so indulgent and unexacting a man could have so described his age, and so earnestly adjured the responsible ruler to rule righteously. But it was all in vain. He might have addressed to himself the words of the Duke of York to John of Gaunt:

‘Vex not yourself, nor strive not with your breath;  
 For all in vain comes counsel to his ear.’

The king dashed on wildly to the inevitable precipice; or, to use Shakespeare’s metaphor, ‘his rash fierce blaze of riot’ could not ‘last’:

‘For violent fires soon burn out themselves;  
 Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short;  
 He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;  
 With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder;  
 Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,  
 Consuming means soon preys upon itself.’

He sowed the wind, and he reaped the whirlwind; and the spectacle of that ghastly harvest was one of the last, as it was assuredly the grimmest, of all the spectacles Chaucer’s eyes ever beheld.

Thus the England of Chaucer's closing years was strangely different from the England of his youth. What promised to be a day of great loveliness and glory ended in storms and tempests, and omens of storms and tempests to come. The prosperity of the country at large no doubt may be regarded separately from the prosperity of the Court; but there is no denying that Court and country to a large extent shared each other's fortunes, though the fall of a monarch by no means meant the fall of his people.

The closing years then of the fourteenth century and of Chaucer's life were a period of monarchical and to a large extent of national trouble, whereas the middle decades of the said century and the time of Chaucer's boyhood and adolescence were a period of monarchical vigour and of national triumph. In many various respects the England of Chaucer's youth was distinguished by new motives and energies, and entered upon a new stage of development. In its commercial aims and relations, in its attitude towards the Papacy and its exactions, and also to certain tenets of the mediæval Church, in its social condition and tendencies, in its municipal and constitutional progress, in its consciousness of its capacity and its position, the England of Chaucer's youth made a new departure, and opened a new chapter in its history; for, though some of these new directions were for a time checked, yet on the whole what was done was never undone; the lines then laid down, or then recognized, were in fact the lines on which the country was sooner or later to proceed commercially, ecclesiastically, socially, politically, imperially. It was a fresh and breezy air that the young Chaucer breathed—the fresh quickening air of a bright dawning—an air that inspired courage and confidence and hope. There was a pervading sense of a new era that would offer Englishmen better opportunities and chances, and witness new accomplishments both per-

sonal and national. Such are memorable and happy times in the history of a people; and it is at such that its heart is stirred within it. It is in such ages of proud and delightful self-consciousness—ages in which it is a pleasure to live, and there is a thrilling sense that one belongs to a mighty and noble race—that great poets arise and embody the spirit they find active but inarticulate all around them. In their songs is expressed the joy of the land—its buoyancy, its strenuousness, its exultation.

We cannot within the limits of this Introduction attempt to illustrate in detail the various new departures we have mentioned. It must suffice to remind our readers that, however mistaken and blundering was a great part of the legislation as to trade and commerce, it was in Edward III.'s reign that considerable mercantile advance was made. It was in that reign that England first began to be a manufacturing country. Till then it had exported to the factories of Bruges and Ghent the wool which it produced in enormous quantities and of a quality highly valued on the Continent. It was Edward III., full of military ambitions and happily forced keenly to consider the ways and means of their gratification, to whom it occurred that his exchequer might be abundantly benefited if this precious material were not only produced at home but converted into cloth there. The settlement of certain weavers at Norwich had wonderful consequences—consequences no doubt infinitely beyond the wildest dreams of contemporaries. To turn to another point, the allegiance of England to the Papal See began to show unmistakable signs of weakness and dissolution. Many causes combined to bring about this not undesirable result. 'The Papal Schism' was proving a dreadful scandal, and effecting far and wide a significant disillusionment. The country was becoming more and more restive as to the prodigious

sums of money that passed year by year into the Pope's treasury. The Parliament of 1343, in a petition against Papal interferences with or usurpations of ecclesiastical preferments, declared that 'the Pope's revenue from England alone is larger than that of any Prince in Europe.' 'And at this very time the deaneries of Lichfield, Salisbury, and York, and the Archdeaconry of Canterbury were all held by Italian dignitaries [these persons were commonly non-resident], while the Pope's collector sent from London 20,000 marks [some £13,000, about £150,000 of our present money] a year to his master at Rome.'<sup>1</sup> The application made by his Eminence for certain arrears of the tribute promised him in a moment of royal degradation by King John was in the temper of the age abruptly refused. It is in connection with this national indignation that Wyclif first stands before us as an influential and effective figure. He is the representative of this anti-papal reaction; and his opposition to the Pope's pecuniary demands soon extended to far other matters, as to which, just as much as to the tribute in question, the most brilliant son of Oxford of that age judged the Pope anything but infallible. Then unquestionably the profligacy which disgraced so many of 'the religious' had its inevitable effect on men's minds. What scandalous persons are Chaucer's Friar and Pardoner, and spiritually his Monk is scarcely better! How infamous are certain Orders as depicted by Langland! And yet neither Chaucer nor Langland is inclined to Lollardry; both are wellwishers of the reigning Church and solicitous for its reputation and honour. Thus their descriptions of clerical and monastic demoralization and iniquity must be allowed to have considerable significance; and respect for a system

<sup>1</sup> See Gibbins' *Industrial History of England*, 1880, p. 50.

associated with such dissolute figures as they bring before us must have been very seriously impaired—must have been in great danger of extinction. No doubt there were to be found professors of the Christian faith of a very different sort from these disreputable *roués*; but they were less in evidence in the London streets and taverns, and the mischief wrought by their wanton fellows was beyond calculation. So the reverence readily and justly paid to the predecessors of these miscreants—readily and justly paid when the memory and the example of St. Francis and his intimates were still potent—could no longer be expected; and the loss of reverence for members of an Order is sure soon to extend to the Order itself. And other causes were making men highly critical of the medieval Church and its ways. The seeds of the Reformation were in fact already quickening, though the harvest was not to be yet. Meanwhile the social and the political progress of the country was proceeding apace. It is a fact of great significance that at this time, as we have already mentioned, knights of the shire and burgesses—that is, country and town members—first sat together in one House.

‘In no other country of Europe,’ writes Dr. Gardiner, ‘would this have been possible. The knights of the shire were gentlemen who on the Continent were reckoned amongst the nobility and despised townsmen far too much to sit in the same House with them. In England there was the same amalgamation of classes in Parliament as on the battle-field. When once gentlemen and burgesses formed part of the same assembly, they would come to have common interests; and, in any struggle in which the merchants were engaged, it would be a great gain to them that a class of men trained to arms would be inclined to take their part.’

Thus in the domestic politics of England not less than in its foreign wars a more and more complete national



unity was being brought about—not consciously, but yet certainly and surely. Much progress was made in the combination and fusion of various elements that could not continue separate and incohesive without disastrous consequences. England accomplished a noteworthy advance towards becoming an organic whole. It was only an advance; the consummation of the movement was far off—it is not yet reached even now, five centuries and more since Edward III.'s days; but it was an important advance, and an advance that was never lost. The House of Commons grew more solid and more powerful; and so the country at large, the House of Commons being as it were an image of it. The social and other results of the Black Death cannot easily be exaggerated; they have not yet been adequately explored, though from time to time fresh outcomes are being noted and reported. Undoubtedly the position of the labourer was permanently changed by that tremendous visitation, however obstinately selfish legislators set themselves to obstruct or retard the irresistible current of events. Menenius' words might well have been addressed to retrogressives, though no doubt they would have been addressed in vain:

‘You may as well

Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them  
Against the English 'state, whose course will on  
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs  
Of more strong link asunder than can ever  
Appear in your impediment.’

Such foes may succeed in clogging and impeding the wheels of social improvement, but they cannot stop them; slowly, but inevitably, those wheels roll on, and there is no final station in their journey, so long as a state is healthy and sound. All through the Middle Ages the

Church, and from the thirteenth century the Universities, did excellent service for the common weal by preventing any rigid and impassable barriers forming between the extreme classes or ranks of the country. Often through their beneficent influence men of the humblest birth rose to the highest positions, and the accidents of fortune or misfortune were splendidly remedied. In the fourteenth century commerce too began to have successful and distinguished representatives, who became a sort of new aristocracy perpetually recruited from an order of ever increasing numbers and ever increasing power. John Philpot and Richard Whittington stand high amongst the leading men of their time; they were the lords of the mercantile world and possessed of means that gave them enormous influence. From time to time then, as often enough now, these wealthy traders passed into a different social circle, and received distinctions and titles, which they bequeathed to their posterity, thus becoming founders of families eminent and famous in subsequent times. The De la Poles of Hull may be taken as aptly illustrating this side of fourteenth-century life. In 1327 Richard, the elder of two highly enterprising and brilliantly successful brothers, was appointed Chief Butler to the King—a post of great honour and great emolument. We hear of him lending the king very large sums of money, and in other ways devoting himself to the king's service. 'In 1335 he was made a Justice-in-eyre for Yorkshire; and in 1336 we read that he received a reward of 250 marks "for the excessive labours he had maintained in expediting certain affairs of the king's."'<sup>1</sup> He died in 1345, leaving his heirs some valuable properties, besides a large sum to certain clergy for distribution to the poor. Meanwhile

<sup>1</sup> Fox Bourne's *English Merchants*, 1886, p. 39.

his brother William 'was rising to the highest honours proper to a merchant prince. When the king visited Hull, he entertained him "splendidly and nobly." He spent freely in the royal cause, and received several valuable acknowledgments; he enjoyed in an unusual degree the king's friendship and intimacy, and obtained grants securing for his daughters suitable marriages.' He was not without experiences of what we may call the *regalis aura* as distinguished from Horace's *popularis*; for some years he, through no fault of his, was treated with coldness and severity; but at last he was restored to favour, and so closed a truly useful and philanthropic life in 1366. His eldest son, Michael, with whom Chaucer must have often been brought into contact, became Chancellor of England in 1383, and was created Earl of Suffolk in the following year. William de la Pole, a grandson of this Michael, the fourth Earl, became the first Duke of Suffolk. This Duke of Suffolk married a daughter of Thomas Chaucer, who, if not the poet's son, was certainly a near connection of his; but it is not on account of this alliance that we have given this notice of the De la Poles. Our purpose has been to call attention to the position a merchant might win at that time, and the De la Poles have been selected because the 'business' of one of them at least reminds us of the Chaucer family. Richard de la Pole was, as we have seen, at one time Chief Butler; and one John Chaucer, who was probably the poet's father, was in 1348 Deputy to the King's Butler at Southampton. How Geoffrey Chaucer came to be enrolled amongst the pages of the wife of a prince of 'the blood'—of the Duchess of Clarence, wife of Prince Lionel—is at present a very perplexing question. Possibly what has just been said of the prosperity of commerce and its leaders at this time, and more particularly the facts that Richard de la Pole was

the King's Chief Butler, and Chaucer's father a deputy to the King's Butler, may promote further investigations as to the social problem in question.

All these divers movements—municipal, religious, social, imperial—worked together in the direction of national unity and strength; they all tended to diminish or destroy distinctions of race, if any remained, as well as distinctions of class. And one inevitable result of such co-operation and tendency was the close of what may be called the bilingual period of our history and the final establishment of one common language. It was a necessary condition for the rise of a great national poet representing the country in all its fullness that there should be one national language; and this condition was at this time just being satisfied. The fusion of the two races—the Norman-French and the Anglo-Saxon—had been pretty well completed for some generations. It must be remembered that they were both of the Teutonic family, and in respect of the Anglian element at least very closely akin; and as early as the reign of King Henry II.<sup>1</sup> they began to intermix. Richard, Bishop of London, who wrote the *Dialogus de Scaccario* in the time of King Henry II., declares that 'already the English and Normans dwelling together and intermarrying are so mixed that among freemen at least it can scarcely be determined to-day who is of English, or who of Norman birth.' And nothing occurred to retard, many things occurred to expedite and accomplish the said amalgamation. Normandy was severed from England in 1204.

<sup>1</sup> 'Sed hic Henricus de quo nobis sermo [Henricus Primus] conjugii hinc inde factis inter eos aliisque quibuscunque potuit modis, ad firman populos utrosque federavit concordiam, dinque feliciter Angliam, Walliam, Normanniam et Britanniam rexit ad honorem Dei subjectorumque divitias multas et jugem letitiam.'—Mapes' *De Nugis Curialium*, Camden Society edition, 1850, p. 209.

‘In 1244 Louis IX. of France summoned the English nobles to relinquish their possessions in England or to give up all claim to those in France. In retaliation for this the English King Henry III. ordered all Frenchmen, especially Normans, who held possessions in England to be deprived of their property.’<sup>1</sup>

In the Wars of the Barons, as we have remarked above, the natives and the invaders fought side by side, whether under the king or under Simon de Montfort. And probably by the close of the thirteenth century racial antagonism was absolutely extinct, though some racial diversities may have still been perceptible. But the marriage of the languages was a slower and a more difficult matter to settle. For many years they flowed within the same channel, and yet kept apart, just as the milk-white Arve and the dark-blue Rhone or as the Maine and the Rhine may be seen flowing together for many a mile without commixture. For two centuries the admission of French words into English—that is, written English—was remarkably scanty; but the amount gradually increased, and at last in the latter years of the thirteenth and in the first half of the fourteenth century it became so considerable as permanently to modify the composition of our vocabulary. Thus a new and splendid instrument was ready for Chaucer’s use; and he used it splendidly.

French had been not only spoken but written in England; and there had been developed a special form—a dialect—of the language that it is well to speak of by a special name as Anglo-French or Anglo-Norman. And of this Anglo-French there were probably varieties, all of a type different from the French of Paris. But in the course of the fourteenth century we find Englishmen becoming conscious of two things: first, that the French they write

<sup>1</sup> Emerson’s *History of the English Language*, 1894, p. 57.

demands some apology, perhaps even if judged according to the Anglo-French standard; and, secondly, that if the general public is to be reached, they must write, not in any kind of French,<sup>1</sup> but in English—in the old pre-Norman-Conquest tongue of the country—in what had been and what was, in spite of successful inroads and occupations, the vernacular. Even such a seemingly well educated man as Gower is conscious of deficiencies in his French scholarship,<sup>2</sup> and so others, as William of Waddington. But yet more noticeable are the confessions or statements that French is unintelligible to the ordinary person, and the fact that translations from the French become common. Thus about the year 1320 the author of the *Cursor Mundi*, a popular rendering of biblical and other stories, while he does not object to French for the French, insists on English for the English. ‘I translate this same book,’ he says, ‘into the English tongue for love of the English people, so the common people may understand it. I have read French rhymes in this country generally in every place. Most is done for Frenchmen; what for him that knows no French? The nation of the English consists mainly of Englishmen. The speech that one may best get on with, one should for the most part speak. Seldom by any chance has the English tongue been praised in France. Let us give each one his own language; methinks we do no harm so. I address myself to the unlearned and to

<sup>1</sup> ‘The wars of Edward III. produced many songs both in Latin and in English, as did also the troubles which disturbed the reign of his successor. With the end of the reign of Edward II., however, we begin to lose sight of the Anglo-Norman language, which we shall not again meet with in these popular effusions.’—Wright’s *Political Songs of England* (Camd. Soc.), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> See Macanlay’s *Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. i.; *The French Works*, p. xvi.

Englishmen, who understand what I say.’<sup>1</sup> And so Richard Rolle of Hampole in his *Prick of Conscience*, circa 1340—about the very time of Chaucer’s birth—informs us that his work contains various matters ‘that are unknown to the unlearned men of England, that can understand nothing but English’; and therefore he would compose ‘his treatise’<sup>2</sup> to be called in the English tongue the *Prick of Conscience*, ‘prick,’ translating the Latin ‘stimulus,’ ‘conscience,’ being a word already anglicized, having

- <sup>1</sup> ‘This ilk bok is [*lege* it?] es translate  
 In to Inglis tong to rede  
 For the loue of Inglis lede,  
 Inglis lede of Ingland,  
 For the commun at understand.  
 Frankis rimes here I redd  
 Communlik in ilka sted;  
 Mast es it wrought for Frankis man;  
 Quat is for him no Frankis can?  
 Of Ingland the nacioun  
 Is Inglis man thar in commun.  
 The speche that man wit[h] mast may spede  
 Mast þar-wit[h] to speke war nede.  
 Selden was for ani chance  
 Praised Inglis tung in France.  
 Giue we ilkan thar langage;  
 Me think we do them non outrage.  
 To laud [*i.e.*, lewd] and Inglis man I spell  
 That understandis that I tell.’

*Cursor Mundi*, ed. Morris, Cotton MS.

- <sup>2</sup> ‘In thir seven er sere materes drawen  
 Of sere bukes, of whilk som er unknowen  
 Namly til lewed men of England  
 ‘That can noght bot Inglise undirstand.  
 ‘Tharfor this tritice drawe I wald  
 In Inglise tung that may be cald  
 ‘Prick of Conscience,’ etc.

*The Pricke of Conscience*, ed. for the Phil.  
 Soc. by R. Morris, 1863, p. 257.



superseded the vernacular 'Ayenbite.' So in the Prologue to *English Metrical Homilies from MSS. of the Fourteenth Century* (ed. John Small, 1862), the author declares it is his special purpose to show 'something' that he 'has in heart':

'On Ingelis tong that alle may  
Understand quat I wil say.  
For laued men havis mar mister  
Godes word for to her  
Than klerkes that thair mirour lokes  
And sees hou thai sal lif on bokes;  
And bathe klerk and laued man  
Englis understand kan,  
That was born in Ingeland  
And long haues ben thar in wonand.  
Bot al men can noht, I wis,  
Understand Latin and Frankis.  
Forthi me think almous it isse  
To wirke sum god thing on Inglisse,' etc.

So Thomas Usk in his *Testament of Love*, circa 1387, till lately so ridiculously ascribed to Chaucer by critics who surely could never have read it:

'In Latin and French hath many soverayne wi'tes had greet delyt to endyte and have many noble thinges fulfild; but certes there ben some that speken their poysye matter in Frenche, of which speche the Frenche men have as good a fantasye as we have in hering of Frenche mennes English. And many terms there ben in English of which unneth we Englishmen connen declare the knowleginge. How shulde then a Frenche man born such termes conne jumpere in his mater but as the jay chatereth English? Right so, trewly, the understanding of Englishmen wol not strecche to the privy terms in French, whatsoever we borten of strange laugage. Lat then clerkes endyten in Latin, for they have the propertee of science and the knowynge in that facultee; and let Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kyndely to



their mouthes ; and let us shewe our fantasyes in suche wordes as we lerneden of our dames tongue.'

And many other passages might be quoted to show with what irresistible force the old language was at this time recovering its sovereignty. It had never been uprooted ; but it had been overlaid and hidden, and for a time had held a very obscure place in literature. Now it came once more to the front, and became again the chief literary language of England, displacing the French that had so long dethroned and overshadowed it.

There can be no more decisive illustration of this revival than the fact that, in the time of Chaucer's youth or early manhood, English became once more the teaching medium in schools, that is, became not the subject-matter of instruction but the vehicle by which instruction was conveyed, *e.g.*, the language into which boys translated their Latin. Robert of Gloucester, about 1300, had remarked on the great importance attached to French, and that the 'highmen of this land' clung to French, and expressed his belief that the kingdom of England was entirely singular in this respect :

'Ich wene ther ne beth in al the world contreyes none  
That ne holdeth to hor owe speche bote England one.'

And some fifty years later Higden in his *Polychronicon* actually complains of the current scholastic usage. To use the words of his translator, John de Trevisa, Higden speaks of the 'impairing of the birth tongue' by two things :

'One is for children in school against the usage and manner of all other nations be compelled for to leave their own language and for to construe their lessons and their things in French, and so have they since the Normans came first into England. Also

[this is the second "thing"] gentlemen's children be taught to speak French from the time that they be rocked in their cradle and can speak and play with a child's brooch [let us hope a "safety" brooch]; and uplandish men [*i.e.*, even men that do not belong to the towns] will liken themselves to gentlemen, and strive with great business for to speak French for to be well thought of.'

Evidently in the West Midlands, to which Higden belonged both by birth and by residence, the national spirit was resenting the suppression of the national tongue, and eyeing with disfavour those apes of fashion for whom English was not good enough. And this indignation was soon to be satisfactorily allayed. Not many years after Higden gave vent to his disgust, certainly some time before 1385:

'John Cornwall, a Master of Grammar, changed the lore in Grammar Schools and construction of French into English. And Richard Pencrich learned this manner of teaching of him, and other men of Pencrich;<sup>1</sup> so that now, the year of our Lord a thousand three hundred four score and five, and of the Second

<sup>1</sup> That distinguished scholar Mr. W. H. Stevenson has almost certainly identified this worthy teacher. In a valuable paper in a valuable volume, *An English Miscellany, Presented to Dr. F. J. Furnivall*, 1901, he points out that in 1347 there was at the head of a Hall for the teaching of grammar at Oxford a 'Magister Johannes Cornubiensis,' to whom certain payments were made by Merton College for boys of the Founder's kin. Mr. Stevenson also notes that there was a person of the name of 'Penkrissh' living near Merton College in 1367, who possibly enough may have been the other grammar teacher mentioned by Trevisa. These identifications are made yet more plausible by the fact that Trevisa was himself a contemporary Oxford man, a Fellow of Queen's College from 1369 to 1374, and then for a time a Fellow of Exeter. It is noticeable that, to judge from their names, both Cornwall and Pencrich were Kelts; but perhaps Pencrich came from Penkridge in Staffordshire.

King Richard after the Conquest nine, in all the Grammar Schools of England, children leaveth French and construeth and learneth in English. . . . Also gentlemen have now much left for to teach their children French.'

John de Trevisa, who makes this addition to Higden's words, acknowledges that the complete neglect of French that resulted from this reform—'Children of the Grammar Schools,' he says, 'now know no more French than their left heel' (a curious type of ignorance)—was not without some disadvantage; but there can be no doubt that John Cornwall's innovation was on the whole heartily welcomed. There were some well-reputed schools in London in Chaucer's time; but we have no record of any London schoolmaster at that time following Cornwall's lead. Probably, however, Chaucer's school-days were over when this new departure was taken.

There can be no question but Chaucer was well acquainted with French, which indeed was still the Court language till the very close of his life, and, had he pleased, could have poetized in French just as Gower did. How well he had read the *Roman de la Rose* is obvious from many of his works besides the fragment of his translation of that popular poem. It is by no means improbable that he did produce some verses in French; but no French lines of his have been preserved, so far as is at present known, any more than any French piece by Wyclif, though Wyclif wrote in French as well as in Latin and English.<sup>1</sup> With Latin he was less at home than with French, as may pretty certainly be concluded from his translation of the *Consolatio Philosophiæ*, which is not without tell-tale inaccuracies. Probably Gower was the superior Latinist, and any Latin performance of Chaucer would

<sup>1</sup> See Shirley's *Catalogue of the Original Works of John Wyclif*, 1865, p. vi.

have fallen short even of the moderate merit of the *Vox Clamantis* or the *Tripartite Chronicle*. But, whatever his linguistic acquisitions in French or in Latin, and whatever his temptations to air them, it is certain that while yet a young man he adopted English as the language in which he would as a poet say his say, or rather in which he would sing what songs he had to sing. Like Dante, he chose the national language for his poetic use. The great national movement of his age, which we have indicated, unquestionably inspired and guided his choice. His fine instinct made him feel and realize the glorious qualities of his mother-tongue—its wealth, its flexibility, its sensitiveness, and that whatever he had to express could be adequately and admirably expressed in it by one to whom it was familiar—to whom had been revealed the secrets of its excellent capabilities. He was not unaware of its deficiencies and that it sorely needed cultivation; but above all its shortcomings he vividly recognized its power and its destiny. Like Milton, he might have spoken of ‘the love’ he bore his ‘native language to serve it first with what’ he endeavoured.<sup>1</sup> And so again, like Milton, knowing that ‘it would be hard to arrive at the second rank among the Latins’ or among the French, he applied himself ‘to that resolution which Ariosto followed against all the persuasions of Bembo, to fix all the industry and art’ he ‘could write to the adorning of my native tongue . . . that what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy and those Hebrews of old did for their country’ he in his proportion might do for his, ‘not caring to be once named abroad, though perhaps’ he ‘might attain to that, but content with these British islands as my world.’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Milton’s *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*.

<sup>2</sup> See how Dante defends his use of his native language in his

Thus, while Gower, it would seem, hesitated between the three languages then more or less current in England, Chaucer at an early age selected English as his medium, and set himself to translate into English the most popular French poem of his day. And Gower, no doubt moved and encouraged by Chaucer's example, presently attempted work in English, though even in his closing years he sometimes wrote in Latin, and, if his latest editor is right, in French also.<sup>1</sup>

Of course the English Chaucer wrote is vastly different from the English of the time of the Norman Conquest, some three centuries before. At that earlier time our language might still be described as synthetic in its grammar and homogeneous in its vocabulary. But both in its grammar and in its vocabulary it was already in a state of alteration; and, had William the Conqueror never landed in this island, it would assuredly have soon dropped off many inflexions, and also admitted many new words—and of these a large proportion Norman-French. But these developments were greatly quickened by the

*Convito*, book i. He speaks of the natural love of his native tongue, and says 'that natural love moves the lover principally to three things: the one is to exalt the loved object, the second is to be jealous thereof, the third is to defend it, as each one sees constantly to happen; and these three things made me adopt it, that is, our mother-tongue, which naturally and accidentally I loved and have loved.' (Miss Sayer's translation.) Boccaccio tells us that the question as to why Dante, a man of great learning, chose to write the *Commedia* in Italian instead of in Latin exercised the minds of many wise men of his day. In his *Vita di Dante* Boccaccio gives his own answer. See Mr. Paget Toynbee's *Dante Alighieri*, Methuen and Co., 1900, pp. 215, 216; also Mr. Snell's *Fourteenth Century*, 1899, pp. 197-201. It is well known Dante did make a beginning of his poem in Latin.

<sup>1</sup> See Macaulay's *Works of John Gower* (Clar. Press), 1899, vol. i., p. lxxii.

Norman Conquest; and with regard to one of them the result of that Conquest was very considerable indeed; for at last the gates of our language were thrown wide open, so to speak, and not only a few stragglers but a host of foreign vocables marched in and found a permanent settlement and home. This abundant denization was pretty well effected by when Chaucer began to write. To accuse him of deluging his native tongue with alien words is to show a complete ignorance of the facts of the case. Any one who does so evidently knows nothing of the vocabulary of so emphatically—perhaps we may say so limitedly—an English writer as Langland. When Alexander Gil declares that up to Chaucer's time there was no foreign element in the English vocabulary, he simply displays a perfect unacquaintance with the subject of which he is treating. The head master of St. Paul's School *temp.* King James I. —Milton was one of his pupils—delivers himself in this wise: .

‘Huc [he has just been speaking of Robert of Gloucester] vsque peregrinæ voces in lingua Anglica inauditæ. Tandem, circa annum 1400. Galfridus Chaucerus, infausto omine, vocabulis Gallicis et Latinis poesin suam famosam reddidit. Hic enim vulgi indocti stupor est, ut illa maxime quæ non intelligit admiretur. Hinc noua profluxit scribendi et loquendi scabies. Nam vt quisque sciolus videri vult et linguæ Latinæ Gallicæ aliæque suam peritiam venditare, ita quotidie fera vocum monstra cicuriat; horridasque et male sonantes nidique infaustipicas et cicumas nostra verba conari docet. Sic hodie fere ex iis Anglis sumus, qui Anglice non loquuntur, ab Anglicis auribus non intelliguntur.’<sup>1</sup>

And so this furious pedagogue lashes himself into a rage against one who was absolutely innocent of the enormity he is accused of—who, indeed, could not possibly have

<sup>1</sup> *Anglonomia Anglica*, second edition, 1621, Præf.



committed it, unless he wished to make himself wholly unreadable and unread. For a great and popular poet must use a speech understood of the people. Beyond any question, as we might be sure from *a priori* considerations, and are quite sure from *a posteriori*, that is, from an inspection of contemporary literature, Chaucer ventured on no such liberties with his mother-tongue. He took it just as he found it, and handled it with the utmost care and respect. So far from corrupting it, he devoted himself to the preservation of its form and its purity. No poet—not even Tennyson or Virgil—ever more earnestly strove to use his language in an accurate and scholarly style. The minute investigations of such experts as Ten Brink and Professor Skeat have demonstrated the extraordinary pains he spent over matters of pronunciation as well as of morphology. And so far from running into any excess in his use of terms of French origin, he has been shown to be less lavish in this respect than others of his time. It may be doubted whether he imported into the language any new Gallicisms whatever, it being remembered that he wrote it as it was spoken, and that if any French words should be or are found in his writings for the first time, no one is justified in concluding that he was the first to introduce them; the probability would be or is that he found them current. Much rather than to be denounced as a corrupter of his native tongue does he deserve to be styled as Spenser styles him :

‘ Well of English undefyled,  
On Fame’s eternall beadroll worthie to be fyled.’<sup>1</sup>

The English of the latter part of the fourteenth century was in a curious and critical period of its career, gram-

<sup>1</sup> *Fucrie Queen*, iv. 32.



matically and dialectically, as well as lexically. It had reached the final stage of its inflexional form, and Chaucer was a faithful student of its condition, and observed with singular faithfulness and consistency what rules or habits it still recognized or followed. It was Tyrwhitt (1775) who first did him justice in the matter of the final e, and, by pointing out the grammatical force of that so frequent ending of Chaucer's words, led the way to a real knowledge of Chaucerian English. We have learnt to appreciate the poet's flexional accuracy, and to perceive that he did not regard the minutest details of verbal form as beneath his notice or outside his duty. How conspicuous is his carefulness in these niceties is shown remarkably by contrasting his grammar with that of his immediate successors. We may say that he has preserved for ever our language at a certain moment in its evolution with a wonderful skill that could have resulted only from conscientious and affectionate observation. Scarcely one of his followers and imitators—Hoccleve, Clanvowe, Lydgate, and others—understood his secret, or had the ability or the industry, or indeed the opportunity, to master it. It died with him; and at the same time passed away the phase of the language which he so faithfully caught and stereotyped.

When Chaucer chose English for his linguistic medium, there were many kinds of English, that is, many dialects, at his service. His decision in this respect, however, was made for him by the circumstance that he was born and, we may presume, bred in London, and so perforce was brought up in the use of the London dialect—an East-Midland dialect with some Southern and some Northern features, which was already destined to become the national language.<sup>1</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> On the relation of Chaucer's English to that of London, see Morsbach's *Neu-Englische Schriftsprache*, 1888, pp. 152-160.

England, as elsewhere—as in ancient Greece ultimately, as in Italy ancient and modern, as in medieval France—a battle of dialects had to be fought; and in fact had been fought, and had been decided before—not long before—the rise of Chaucer. But, though in fact the supremacy of the East-Midland dialect was then assured, we must note that, in the time of Chaucer's youth and yet later, there were several provincial literatures in England, viz., a Northern, a Southern, a south-west Midland, and a north-west, beside other varieties; and, till Chaucer arose, the poets of the provinces were of higher merit and distinction than anyone of whom the metropolis could boast. Langland, of Shropshire probably by birth and Worcestershire by education, and the author of *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight*, probably of Cheshire or South Lancashire, were incomparably the best poets in England about the time Chaucer began to write. They were worthy representatives of the dawn of the great national revival that was to attain its culmination in *Troilus and Cressida* and the *Canterbury Tales*, and would have made the period remarkable in the history of English literature, even if no greater genius had appeared to glorify it. Their fame was inevitably dimmed by the rays of the superior luminary that arose; but it is being more and more fully recognized now that the fourteenth century is more thoroughly studied. They belonged, however, in many ways rather to the olden time. Their metrical forms are significant of their surroundings and sympathies. They are not fully inspired with the spirit of the new age and the new culture, the survivors of the past rather than the spokesmen of the present, or the heralds of the coming time.

With what a fine instinct or a sound judgment Chaucer made his choice between the various poetical forms that lay before him, we at this distance of time are well able to

perceive. His age, with all its inmost tastes and predilections, metrical and linguistic, found its sufficient exponent in him. He satisfactorily interpreted its tendencies and its needs. He rejected the old alliterative measure, and heartily cultivated rhyme. He turned away from the ancient modes, his ear fascinated by the melodies of the versification that had come into fashion since the days of Cædmon and Cynewulf. Certainly, to some writers of the fourteenth century, it was no easy matter to know which way to take when so many ways lay open, and there was as yet no dominant figure whose leadership was commanding and conclusive. Robert Manning, a Yorkshireman by birth (he was 'of Malton,' he tells us), and a Lincolnshire man by residence (he was in 'the hous of Sixille' for 'a throw,' and then settled at Brunne, now Bourne), was evidently troubled by the variety both of metre and of vocabulary that prevailed all around, and at last wisely determined to write as simply as he could, and to avoid strophic intricacies. After mentioning his historical authorities—Wace and Piers of Langtoft—he tells us of the style that he aimed at in his translation, writing two or three years before Chaucer's birth:

'Als thai haf wryten and sayd,  
Haf I alle in myn Inglis layd,  
In symple speche as I couthe  
That is lightest in mannes mouthe.  
I mad noght for no disours,  
Ne for no seggers, no harpours,  
But for the luf of symple men  
That strange Inglis [*hard English*] can not ken.  
For many it [*there*] ere that strange Inglis  
In ryme wate neuer what it is;  
And bot thai wist what it mente,  
Ellis me thoght it were alle schente.

I made it not forto be prayesd  
Bot at [*that*] the lewed men were aysed.  
If it were made in ryme couwee,  
Or in strangere, or enterlace,  
That rede Inglis it [*there*] ere inowe  
That couthe not haf coppled a kowe,  
That [*so that*] outhere in couwee or in baston  
Som suld haf been fordon;  
So that fele men that it herde,  
Suld not witte howe that it ferde.  
I see in song, in sedgeyng tale  
Of Erceldoun and of Kendale,  
Non tham says as thai tham wrought,  
And in her sayng it seems noght.  
That [*the same fault*] may thou here in Sir Tristrem;  
Ouer gestes it has the steem [*esteem*],  
Ouer alle that is or was,  
If men it sayd as made Thomas;  
But I here it no man say,  
That of some cople som is away;  
So thare fayre sayng here befor  
Is there trauayle nere forlorn.  
Thai sayd it for pride and nobleye  
That non were suylyk as thei;  
And all that thai wild [*would*] ouerwhere  
All that ilk will now forfare.  
Thai sayd in so quante Inglis  
That many one wate not what it is.  
Therefore I henyed [*grudged*] wele the more  
In strange ryme to trauayle sore,  
And my witte was oure thynne  
So strange speche to trauayle in;  
And forsoth I couthe noght  
So strange Inglis as thai wrought.  
And men besoght me many a tyme  
To turne it bot in lighte ryme;  
Thai sayd if I in straunge it turne  
To here it many one suld skurne;

For it [*there*] ere names full selcouth  
 That ere not vsed now in mouthe.  
 And therfore for the comonalte  
 That blythely wild [*would*] listen to me.  
 On lighte lange I it began  
 For luf of the lewed man,  
 To telle them the chaunces bolde  
 That here before was don and tolde.  
 For this makyng I will no mede  
 Bot gude prayere when ye it rede.  
 Therfore, alle ye lordes lewed,  
 For whom I haf this Inglis schewed,  
 Prayes to God he gyf me grace;  
 I trauayled for your solace.’<sup>1</sup>

No contemporary passage brings more vividly before us the unrulèd and unsettled condition of English literature about the middle of the fourteenth century, and how sorely was needed some great master to restore or to establish order in the midst of such anarchy. Such a one was in no long time to arise in him who was probably then a London schoolboy, little conscious of his illustrious destiny.

The confusion of tongues was already being terminated by national necessities. Already, as we have remarked, one of the various dialects was coming into general use, to the overshadowing and obscuring of the others. One of the linguistic sisters, so to speak, was being preferred and enthroned, while the others were reduced to a lower position and rank;<sup>2</sup> and very fortunately this one was the mother-speech of Chaucer, so that in writing it he had his ago with him. The supreme service he had to perform for it was to illustrate its powers of expression, and show that it

<sup>1</sup> See Brunne's *Story of England*, ed. Dr. Furnivall (Rolls series), i. 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> See Morsbach's *Ueber den Ursprung der Neu-Englischen Schrift-sprache*, Heilbronn, 1888.

was able and worthy to be the vehicle of a great literature. And this service he performed triumphantly, so that his Works provided a standard for coming generations—so that two centuries later so lofty a genius as Spenser, to say nothing of lesser writers who intervened and sat adoringly at Chaucer's feet, was proud to acknowledge his debt to his famous forerunner, whom with profound reverence he styles Tityrus, meaning Virgil.

'Uncouth, unkiste,<sup>1</sup> sayde the old famous poete Chaucer, whom for his excellencie and wonderful skil in making his scholler Lidgate a worthy scholler of so excellent a maister, called the Loadestarre of our Language, and whom our Colin Clout [Spenser] in his *Æclogue* calleth Tityrus the God of Shepheards, comparing hym to the worthiness of the Roman Tityrus, Virgile.'<sup>2</sup>

'By Tityrus,' says E. K. in one of his notes to the *Shepheards Calender*, 'I suppose he meanes Chaucer whose prayse for pleasant tales cannot dye, so long as the memorie of hys name shal live, and the name of Poetrie shal endure.'

And in the June idyll Spenser speaks for himself:

'The God of Shepheards, Tityrus, is dead,  
Who taught me homely, as I can, to make.  
He, whilst he lived, was the soveraigne hea'd  
Of shepheards all that bene with love ytake.  
Well couth he wayle his woes and lightly slake  
The flames which love within his heart had bredd,  
And tell us mery tales to keepe us wake,  
The while our shæpe about us safely fedde.

'Nowe dead is he, and lyeth wrapt in lead  
(O! why should Death on hym such outrage shoue?),  
And all hys passing skil with him is fledde,  
The fame whereof doth dayly greater growe.

<sup>1</sup> E. K., it may be presumed, quoted from memory. 'Unknowe, unkiste,' are the actual words in *Troilus*, i. 809.

<sup>2</sup> E. K.'s Epistle prefixed to the *Shepheards Calender*.

But if on me some little drops would flowe  
Of that the spring was in his learned hedde  
I soon would learne these woods to wayle my woe,  
And teache the trees their trickling teares to shedde.'

Nor was such appreciation any mere youthful and transient enthusiasm. In his maturest work he confesses a no less ardent worship, and apologizes for attempting to complete the story that such a genius had left 'half-told':

'Then pardon, O most sacred happie spirit!  
That I thy labours lost may thus revive,  
And steale from thee the meede of thy due merit,  
That none durst ever whilest thou wast alive,  
And being dead in vaine yet many strive.  
Ne dare I like; but, through infusion sweete  
Of thine own spirit which doth in me survive,  
I follow here the footing of thy feete  
That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete.'

Himself so famous a lord of language and of metre, so sensitive and refined a craftsman, to say nothing of his other distinctions, he fully recognized in Chaucer a spiritual kinsman—one not less versed and skilled in the mysteries of poetical technique than himself—the painter of a very different society, but, whatever the contrast of the ages to which they belonged, a brother in the world of art—one who had by his use established and ennobled the language they both so fervently and proudly loved, and bequeathed to posterity accepted and enduring models of exquisite workmanship, and of a style so fluent and natural and so absolutely unaffected, that the reader may easily forget the difficulties, linguistic and metrical, amidst which it was formed, and the careful thought and incessant pains as well as the wonderful faculty with which it was developed to a perfection so rare and sovereign as to make an epoch in the history of English literature.



# THE AGE OF CHAUCER.

## CHAPTER I.

### BALLAD AND CHRONICLE.

IN the writings of both Chaucer and Langland we meet with allusions to the popular poetry of the Date of Early Ballads. time. In *Troilus and Cressida* Pandar speaks of 'the hazel-wood, where jolly Robin played,' while Langland's Sloth declares :

' But I can (*know*) rhymes of Robin Hood and Randolph, Earl of Chester,  
As (*but*) neither of our Lord nor our Lady the least that ever was made.'

The earliest texts in which such rhymes have been preserved are unhappily much later than Langland, and, therefore, the poems in question cannot be identified.

In the existing Robin Hood ballads we meet with a candidate for the shelter of the forest, who  
*The Tale of Gamelyn.* calls himself young Gamwell, and, accosting the leader, puts forward the plea :

' For killing of my own father's steward  
I am forced to this English wood,  
And for to seek an uncle of mine—  
Some call him Robin Hood.'

Like the *Pedigree, Education and Marriage of Robin Hood*, the ballad in which this stanza occurs is believed to be late, and it represents an apparent tendency of late ballads to establish relations between famous outlaws. Just as Adam Bell vies with Robin Hood's father, so young Gamwell claims to be Robin Hood's nephew. Not content with that, he assumes the name of Scathlock or Scarlet, before known as one of Robin Hood's most trusty yeomen.

Who was young Gamwell? In the first place he is probably identical with the Gandeleyne of a ballad wherein Robin is shot by one Wrennock of Doune, and Wrennock of Doune by Gandeleyne, who thus avenges the death of his 'mayster.' Neither 'Gamwell' nor 'Gandeleyne,' however, is the common form of the name, which still exists as an English patronymic. To-day it is contracted into 'Gamlen' or 'Gamlin'; in Chaucer's time it was a trisyllable—Gamelyn. The root of the word is *gamel*, which, though found in Anglo-Saxon, is properly Scandinavian, and its meaning is 'old.' The hero is generally called 'young,' but he was the son of his father's old age, so that, if disposed to be fanciful, we may trace a subtle connection between this circumstance and the derivation of the name.

The *Tale of Gamelyn*, more primitive than either of the ballads aforesaid, is a *lay* in the obsolete sense of a narrative poem of some length. The metre is rude and uneven to a degree that in places almost defies scansion; and, as verse, the production cannot be read with pleasure. It is the common metre a-making—the old alliterative rhythm a-perishing. The division of the lines into two parts is retained, but the principle of alliteration is abandoned. Still, there are occasional lines, as well as a good many alliterative 'tags,' which indicate a transition, almost completed, from the Anglo-Saxon type of poem to the rhyming variety introduced from abroad. For example:

'A steed was saddled smartly and skeet (*quickly*).'

'Christ's curse may he have that clepeth me gadelyng.'

The chief metrical peculiarity is the occurrence of contiguous or consecutive accents, or rather arbitrarily accented syllables, for there is usually nothing in the sense to render this mode of reading either necessary or natural. Somewhat similar is the commencement of a line or half line with an accented syllable as in musical 'three time,' but this is a frequent practice of Chaucer and Lydgate, not to speak of later poets. The poem is divided into fyttes by the formula 'litheth and listeneth,' the Middle English imperative.

Everything points to the *Tale of Gamelyn* being exceptionally antique, and Lindner may be right in assigning it to the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Among other evidences bespeaking an early date is the fact that, while we hear of a king of the forest, there is no mention of Robin Hood by name. It would seem therefore that, at the time this poem was writing, Robin had not yet attained that universal popularity and pre-eminence among outlaws that was afterwards his. On the other hand, the steward who shares Gamelyn's fortunes is called Adam, which may be a reminiscence of an actual, or anticipation of the mythical, Adam Bell. Certain exploits resemble those recorded in the *Lay of Havelok the Dane*. If Havelok slays twenty men with the bar of a door, Gamelyn drives his brother's men 'on a heap' with a 'pestle,' and breaks the arms and legs of festive churchmen with a staff. Such resemblances suggest knowledge of the *Lay*, and may have some bearing on the date of the *Tale*. Professor Lindner, however, adheres to the belief that it was composed about the middle of the fourteenth century, when *Havelok*.

<sup>1</sup> See *Englische Studien*, ed. E. Kölbing, vol. ii.

as appears from Robert of Brunne's *Chronicle*, was still popular.

Like the *Lay*, the *Tale of Gamelyn* is supposed to have been derived, though not immediately, from a Scandinavian source. The story is attractive, and deals with the fortunes of the youngest son of a knight, Sir John of Bounds, or, as the words may perhaps be interpreted, of the Marches. The worthy old man dies after apportioning to each of his three sons his share of the estate, and forthwith all his misgivings begin to be realized. The eldest brother is unjust to the young Gamelyn, who at last revolts and asserts his right to more considerate treatment. Dreading the possibility of a broken head, the false knight patches up a reconciliation, and assents to his brother's wish to attend a wrestling-match, devoutly hoping that the champion will do for him what he has already done for two other challengers. Instead of that, Gamelyn comes off victor and returns to the hall with a merry company. On the pretence that otherwise he will be forsworn, the knight persuades Gamelyn to allow himself to be bound, and then gives out that he is mad. The steward Adam, however, comes to his aid, and, on the occasion of a great feast, the pair burst on the assembled guests with staves. The eldest brother's collar-bone is broken, and abbots, priors, and other reverend persons, who have taken the side of the oppressor, are carried home in sorry plight.

After such proceedings there is but one course for Adam and Gamelyn, and that is to betake themselves to the forest, whither they accordingly repair. They are well received by a party of outlaws, and when the leader obtains the king's pardon, Gamelyn is advanced to his place. About this time the eldest brother is appointed sheriff, and indicts the young 'king.' This Gamelyn feels to be 'shame and villainy.' To his indignation he boldly

crosses into the neighbouring shire, enters the moot-hall, where the knight presides, and lodges a protest. He is seized and cast into prison, whence he is only temporarily released on the application of his second brother, Sir Ote. Gamelyn then hastens to the wood to see how things fare. On his return he finds Sir Ote arrested in his room, and condemned to be hanged. The outlaw-king, with his 'young men of price,' at once delivers the courteous Sir Ote, and, after trial by jury, the unnatural brother and his myrmidons dangle in the wind. Then peace is made with the king. Sir Ote is appointed Justice and Gamelyn Chief Justice of the Free Forest. After mentioning the hero's marriage to a wife both fair and good, the 'lay' concludes, like *Adam Bell*, in a manner truly edifying :

'And sithen (*afterwards*) was Gamelyn graven under ground,  
And so shall we all. May there no man flee.  
God bring us to the joy that ever shall be.'

Picturesque and appealing to our human sympathies, the *Tale of Gamelyn* is interesting in itself, but the poem has yet further claims on our notice. By a chain of accidents it has become associated with the careers of poets no less renowned than Chaucer and Shakespeare. The *Tale* has been preserved in certain Chaucerian texts; and the probability is that the author of the *Canterbury Tales* intended to recast it for the use of his excellent Yeoman. One of the rubrics, however, has assigned it to the Cook. This allocation is evidently an error; and still worse error is the implication that the *Tale* was indited in this rough fashion by Chaucer himself. No doubt he mimicked the minstrels in *Sir Thopas*. But *Sir Thopas* is shorter; it is flagrant parody. However, Chaucer may have remembered this lay in the introduction of his *jeu d'esprit*

‘Now hold your mouth for charity’

is not very unlike :

‘Litheth and iisteneth and holdeth your tongue.’

The connection between the *Tale of Gamelyn* and *As You Like It* is less involved. The Elizabethan play is founded wholly on Lodge’s novel *Euphues’ Golden Legacy*, of which the former part is based on the present composition. As regards the latter part, though no original has yet been discovered, Lodge seems to have gone to Italy for a fleece ‘to match his English wool.’ It is noteworthy that, while the names of the three brothers are twice altered, the characters remain practically unchanged. We hear more of Sir Ote—one of the two Jacques of *As You Like It*. In both later versions he appears as a scholar of price, and, in the play at least, is nearer the hero’s own age than in the *Tale of Gamelyn*. Generally, in the free working of his imagination, Shakespeare soon leaves behind the old poem, and ultimately the *Golden Legacy* also.

Between works of the sort we have just been considering and Lawrence Minot’s war-songs there exists an intimate and, to some extent, obvious affinity. This affinity regards both form and matter. Minot’s poems are written in a diversity of metres, and among them is the alliterative couplet of the *Tale of Gamelyn*. Only, in one or two of the pieces alliteration is carried out much more thoroughly and systematically—in fact, in a way that reminds us of *Piers Plowman* and the alliterative romances. As for his topics, Minot divides his attention between the northern and southern enemies of his country. He celebrates events like the fight on Halidon Hill and the tourney at Nevill’s Cross, in both which his adored sovereign, Edward III., gave the Scots a beating. Minot does not forget

Bannockburn—he recalls it as an occasion whereon the deceitful foe butchered many an innocent Englishman—but the havoc has now been repaid with interest. While, however, Edward has had his will at Berwick, where Scots brought him the keys, Minot does not fool himself into the belief that all is over. He has a lively fear, not of their prowess, but of their ‘guile.’

Of Minot himself we know nothing. He probably belonged to a Yorkshire family of standing; he certainly wrote in a Northern dialect tinged with Midland. The MS. of the poems, which forms part of the Cottonian collection at the British Museum, dates from the early fifteenth century, and, judging from other poems copied in the same set, the scribe was more of a Northerner than Minot. A family of Minots was settled in Norfolk; and to this family, it has been suggested, Lawrence may have belonged. Among the not too multitudinous details brought together regarding thirteenth and fourteenth century Minots, perhaps the most promising are those which concern a Michael and a Thomas. Michael, after weathering political storms, was, in 1338, a wealthy man and king’s merchant. Thomas was king’s notary, and between December, 1351, and February, 1352, one of a committee of three deputed to take possession of a castle in Flanders. The time of this mission, as Mr. Hall has pointed out, coincides with the capture of Guisnes. Now, whereas the English chroniclers make little of this achievement, Minot, in his last poem, tells us all about the ladder, and the long line, and the boat that made the adventurers secure. Apart from a few such touches, not perhaps authentic, Minot does not add to our knowledge. Indeed, if we relied on the guidance of his poems, we should be misled with regard to more than one episode. For example, the third, which recounts the sack of South-



ampton and the taking of the *Christopher*, is quite unhistorical.

Minot's poems are not, like those of Tyrtæus, pure odes, but the praise bestowed by Lycurgus on the Spartan bard—if it be allowable to call Tyrtæus Spartan—is suited also to the English rhymers. Assuredly he is ἀγαθὸς νέων ψυχὰς αἰκάλλειν—he is good at stimulating the hearts of the young. As the narrative element enters so largely into his compositions, they may be considered, most of them, short ballads. But they differ from ordinary ballads, in that the more or less haphazard record of facts is merely the vehicle of exuberantly loyal and patriotic feeling. Everywhere there is the throb and thrill of passion. Minot is not at all careful to interest his readers by a well-told tale, but he is resolved that they shall sympathize, like good Englishmen, with the exploits of their countrymen and the greatness of their king.

Although his strains are inspiring, Minot's verse will not bear the test of a scrupulous criticism. War Song and Romance. Writing, it would appear, for the 'man in the street,' Minot was the Rudyard Kipling of his age. He is to the core Imperialist. But the older writer is without Mr. Kipling's wide experience, and marvellous versatility, and perennial freshness. Minot had not even the advantage of a good literary tradition behind him. His poems are full of well-worn commonplaces, of which there was an inexhaustible supply in the English adaptations of French romances. One curious result is that absolutely nonsensical phrases are sometimes foisted in for the ekeing out of a line. Such an expletive as 'is nought at hide' might easily perplex the uninitiated. Thanks to the industry of Mr. Hall, who has been at great pains to illustrate the verbal relations of the poems with contemporary literature, we are in a position

to realize how much the mechanical toil of versifying was lessened by a litany of phrases appealing to the ear. Minot not only borrows their vocabulary; he observes the conventions of the romancers. One of his rubrics is as follows:

‘How Edward, as the romance says,  
Held his siege before Calais.’

With this couplet compare the lines in the *Soldan of Babylon*:

‘As it is written in romancë  
And founden in books of antiquity.’

It may be that Minot has in mind some French history like that of the Bourgeois of Valenciennes—Brunne certainly calls Langtoft’s *Chronicle* a ‘romance’—but it is more likely that the poet betrays the source, not of his information, but of his inspiration. Like Froissart, he recognizes the romantic aspects of contemporary life, and carries the spirit, and even the letter, of romance into his portrayal of it. It is probable that the songs still extant are only the remains of a considerable body of verse; there are unmistakable signs that Minot regarded himself as a considerable poet. The modest minstrels, as a rule, did not obtrude their personalities, but the sentiments and intentions of Lawrence Minot are, for him, and even for us, a highly important factor in his poetry. His egoism is not so alluring as Chaucer’s, but reminds one of Chaucer’s, especially in the introduction to his seventh poem. Minot’s great successor, it is well known, could never dispense with an introduction, and how he liked to talk about himself, and his books, and his authorities! He was also not innocent of self-dispraise. Some premonitions of the sort appear in Minot. But it may be as well to quote the passage:

'Men may read in ròmance right  
 Of a great clerk that Merlin hight ;  
 Full many books are of him witten,  
 As these clerkés well may witten (*know*),  
 And yet in many privy nooks  
 May men find of Merlin books.  
 Merlin said thus with his mouth,  
 Out of the north into the south  
 Should come a boar out of the sea  
 That should make many [a] man to flec ;  
 And in the sea, he said full right,  
 Should he show full mickle might ;  
 And in France he should begin  
 To make them wroth that are therein  
 Until the sea his tail reach shall,  
 All folk of France to mickle bale.  
 Thus have I matter for to make,  
 For a noble prince's sake :  
 Help me, God, my wit is thin,  
 Now Lawrence Minot will begin.'

Something should be said as to Minot's art, for here, if  
 anywhere, he excels the minstrels. His  
 Characteristics. metres are varied, and he exhibits no little  
 skill in handling them. A good example  
 of his method is his use of refrain-words in the second  
 poem. Just as in music the theme constantly recurs, but  
 in constantly modified environment, so Minot always re-  
 turns to the same note, but in a slightly altered context.  
 It is the same principle which leads him to repeat, to carry  
 over from line to line, and from stanza to stanza, a word  
 or a sentence, which serves as a link between them. The  
 result is not merely to aid the memory, but to produce a  
 pleasing effect on the ear, and to knit up the poem into a  
 superior unity. As regards the tone of his poetry, what  
 most strikes one in Minot is his expression of bitter

national hate. Neither for Gaul nor Scot has he a good word. It is always the same story of cracking the Scotsman's crown, of teaching the Frenchman his creed. The French were hardly better. Deschamps, for instance foretells the downfall of England in terms of affected pity:

‘ Puis passeront Gaulois le bras marin,  
Le pauvre Anglois détruiront si par guerre  
Qu'adonc diront tous passant ce chemin :  
Au temps jadis était ci Angleterre.’

The Scottish champion in the war of words was John Barbour. He treats, however, not of passing *The Bruce*. events, but of a glorious, still recent past. His hero is the pupil of the spider, the great Robert, who gives his name to the poem: *The Bruce: or the Book of the Most Excellent and Noble Prince Robert de Broyss*. The composition is far above anything Minot ever wrote, but resembles Minot's work inasmuch as it represents the same process of alchemy, the informing of history with sentiment and imagination. Barbour terms his twenty-book epic a ‘romance,’ and the description is just.

Barbour, like James I. and like Sir David Lindsay, wrote in ‘Inglis,’ and in ‘Inglis’ of a type that was current south of the Tweed—Norman-English. Ellis accounted for this phenomenon by suggesting parallel development, Scotland's French alliance having the same linguistic effects as the Norman conquest of England. There is, however, a much simpler explanation—namely, more intercourse between the two countries than their political rivalries would lead us to suspect. The theory that Lowland Scotch, based on Anglo-Saxon, was elevated independently into the literary dialect of the fourteenth century, is surely untenable. Barbour's life and writings render it evident that men of learning were, as usual, less

influenced by prejudice than their unenlightened contemporaries. Just as in our own time young Scotsmen deem it a privilege to repair to the classic banks of Cam and Isis, so was it in the stormy days of the Plantagenets. Is it conceivable that such commerce can have been without result on the style and language of scholars, even of those who did not wander so far afield?

Not many particulars have descended to us of Barbour's career. Respecting his origin we have no evidence more secure than his name. In mature life he appears as a scholar and poet, churchman and politician, of high reputation. Born, it would seem, in 1326, he was in 1357 Archdeacon of Aberdeen. On the 13th of September in that year he was appointed by his bishop member of the commission that was to sit at Edinburgh for the assessment of King David's ransom. On the 13th of the previous August a passport had been granted him, enabling him to proceed to Oxford and place three scholars there. In 1365 he received another passport, his object being to traverse England on his way to St. Denis, near Paris. There were other visits to England and France. In 1377, soon after the completion of *The Bruce*, Barbour received a present of £10 from the king, and in the following year an annuity was bestowed on himself and his assigns. Later, the pension was officially declared to have been a reward for *The Bruce*—‘pro compilacione libri de gestis quondam Regis Roberti de Brus.’ Barbour died, as we learn from the chartulary of Aberdeen, in 1396.

If the archdeacon was a citizen of the world, he was none the less a sincere and ardent patriot. If he was a scholar and a man of sense, he was a poet also, and a man of feeling. Of moderns none is so like him as Sir Walter Scott, who, in the advertisement to the *Lord of the Isles*

as in the introduction to *Castle Dangerous*, cites Barbour among his authorities. When the learned writer set about his *Bruce*, he proposed, there can be little doubt, a strictly historical account, and this, his original intention, he never deliberately abandoned. Barbour pays much attention to chronological and other details, with regard to which his accuracy can be tested by other documents. He is, indeed, a sort of poetical Froissart, from whose pages Scottish life, during one of its most interesting phases, can be in some measure reconstructed. But Barbour, in treating so stirring a theme as the Bruce, finds it impossible to keep within the limits of pure truth or even of probability. Probably he had drunk deeply of the folk-songs whose existence he records, and imbibed their spirit. Accordingly, he succumbs to the temptation of inserting episodes which his sober judgment rejected as fabulous. In order to make peace with himself, he invokes the kindly spell of precedent. In the sixth book of the poem Bruce, single-handed, defeats two hundred men of Galloway, of whom he kills fourteen. Much as he esteems his hero, Barbour might perhaps have felt constrained to omit so indefensible a story. In a happy moment, however, he calls to mind a similar incident in the Tale of Thebes. That suffices. What has happened in Greece may well have happened in bonnie Scotland. The good archdeacon is easy; he writes '*stet.*'

The condition of affairs at the time the poem commences was somewhat as follows. Edward I., imitating the policy of his ancestor the Conqueror, endeavoured to assure the permanence of his sway by dotting Scotland with forts. This procedure proved ineffectual. Bruce, avoiding the shock of superior forces in the field, laid all his plans for the assault and capture of isolated garrisons. But redemption is still far

Spirit of the  
Poem.

away, and at the sight of his beloved country in the occupation of aliens Barbour unbosoms himself of a fine deliverance on liberty:

‘ Ah, freedom is a noble thing !  
 Freedom makes man to have liking ;  
 Freedom all solace to man gives :  
 He lives at ease that freely lives !  
 A noble heart may have no ease,  
 Nor ellës nought that may him please,  
 If freedom fails ; for free liking  
 Is yearnèd o’er all other thing,  
 Nor he that aye has livèd free  
 May not know well the property,  
 The anger, nor the wretched doom  
 That is couplèd with foul thralldòm.  
 But if he had essayèd it,  
 Then all perquer (*par cœur* ?) he should it wit,  
 And should freedom more to prize  
 Than all the good in world that is.’

This is the spirit that animates the Bruce. Rather than become England’s vassal, he parts from wife and children, and wanders, like a common outlaw, up and down the mountains, and in lonely isles of the sea, while his gallant supporter, Sir James Douglas, toils to provide the small but desperately courageous band with game and fish. Commons, however, are none too plentiful. At length the accession of the feeble second Edward affords Bruce an opportunity of which he is swift to avail himself. It goes hard with the English now. Misfortune dogs misfortune. Finally, the Battle of Bannockburn—exultingly described in the thirteenth and fourteenth books—crowns the work. The residue of the poem deals with the achievements of Edward Bruce in Ireland, and with the raids of Douglas, Murray, and other chiefs into disheartened and crestfallen England. One incident in the latter and generally less in-



teresting portion has attracted exceptional notice, as illustrating the character of hero and bard. When Robert was in the south of Ireland and about to return towards Carrickfergus, he heard a cry, and quickly inquired the meaning.

“It is the lavender (*laundress*), sir,” said ane,  
 “That her child-ill right now has ta’en;  
 And we mon (*must*) leave behind us here.  
 Therefore she makes yon evil cheer.”  
 The king said, “Certes, it were pity  
 That she in that point left should be;  
 For, certes, I trow, there is no man  
 That will not rue a woman than.”  
 His host all there arrested he,  
 And gert (*made*) a tent soon stinted be;  
 And gert her gang in hastily,  
 And other women to be her by.  
 While she was delivered he abode,  
 And syne (*afterwards*) forth on his wayës rode,  
 And, how she should forth carried be,  
 Ere he forth fared, ordained he.  
 This was a full great courtesy,  
 That such a king, and so mighty,  
 Gert his men dwell in this manère  
 But for a poor lavender.’

Apart from its greatly superior humanity, *The Bruce* is of much the same quality as Minot’s songs. Barbour, too, dispenses with the finer elements of poetry—those elements that differentiate poetry from verse. He is not without imagination, but it is imagination of a crude, popular sort, inherent in the material. Of fancy blossoming into metaphor, of the myriad little arts that poets know, he is wholly guileless. It is a *musa pedestris*, but for that very reason better suited than a more conscious and cultivated style for a work of such amplitude. Where much ground has to be traversed one cannot pause at every step to admire

the roses, and it were unreasonable to expect what never will be admired. No doubt in a truly poetic soil such beauties arise unbidden, but Barbour was by nature an historian, and only by accident a poet. However, he is not unconscious of the need of variety. In one place he introduces the apologue of the fisher and the fox, which has every appearance of being a French *fabliau*. In another he makes Bruce, during the passage of Loch Lomond, regale his followers with the romance of Fierabras. Coming to the metre—octosyllabic couplets—M. Jusserand points out that it is the same as that of Chaucer's *House of Fame* and he might have added, of Robert Manning's *Chronicle* and the old romances of chivalry. It is the metre *par excellence* for simple, unaffected narration, and after the long reign of Pope's more sonorous verse was restored by Sir Walter Scott, to be again deposed by Byron in favour of statelier measures. Barbour was not a great poet, but he was a good versifier, a good *raconteur*, a good patriot, and Wyntoun thought him a good historian. It follows therefore that he neither lived nor wrote in vain. Of his *Trojan War* we have said nothing, as the fragments ascribed to him are of doubtful authenticity, and in any case, of small worth.

*The Buik of Alexander*, on the other hand, is probably Barbour's. In the verse-tag or colophon at the end the date is given as 1438, but this may easily have been a misreading. *The Bruce* itself alludes to the story of Alexander as told in *The Buik* and in the French *Fuerre de Gadres* and *Vœux du Paon*, of which *The Buik* is a translation. In a paper read before the Philological Society in June, 1900, Mr. George Neilson drew attention to similarities in diction, style, and verse between *The Buik of Alexander* and *The Bruce*, and in the opinion of those present succeeded in establishing the claim of *The Buik* to rank as a

genuine work of Barbour. The Troy-book and the cycle of Legends attributed to the archdeacon were regarded as much less certain. The chief objection to unity of authorship arises out of discrepancy in rhyming. The Troy-book and the Legends rhyme the guttural *e*, as in *he* (high), with the pure *e*, as in *be*. There is but one instance of the kind in *The Bruce*, and the line in which it occurs is found in neither of the MSS. of the poem. Mr. Neilson, however, points out that original works and translated works do not, in this respect, occupy quite the same footing. Even Chaucer acknowledges the difficulty of adapting his rhymes to Grauson's French. It is, therefore, a question whether identity of phrases, in these circumstances, should be permitted to override difference of rhymes, as evidence of authorship. Mr. J. T. T. Brown has discovered in these obscurities ground for very revolutionary doctrine—namely, that *The Bruce*, as we have it, is hardly Barbour's at all. To maintain this theory he has to dispose not only of points in vocabulary and diction, but also of many specific historical allusions to the poem from 1376 onwards. The present work is not the place for a searching investigation of the matter, which has already filled columns of *The Athenæum*, and is further debated in two recent volumes issued by the protagonists—Mr. Brown's *The Wallace and the Bruce Restudied* and Mr. Neilson's *John Barbour, Poet and Translator*. While allowing Mr. Brown all honour for sincerity and skill, it is permissible to believe that *The Bruce*, at any rate, is not destined to be dethroned.

## CHAPTER II.

### ALLITERATIVE POETRY.

As will be seen hereafter, the verse-writers of the East  
East and West Midlands — the school of which Geoffrey  
Midlands. Chaucer is the chief—attach themselves ex-  
clusively to French literary fashion. They  
hold themselves fastidiously aloof from native influences;  
and though, with Ten Brink, it is easy to imagine that  
Chaucer may have seen *Handling Sin*, there is no security,  
nor perhaps likelihood, that he had more than a cursory  
acquaintance with the literature he was destined to super-  
sede. He was, in a twofold sense, bent on innovating.  
He meant, if he could, to clarify the somewhat turbid  
Saxon intellect, and to celebrate the coming-of-age of the  
young Anglo-Norman nation by verse of which the diction  
should be English, the style without ceremony French.  
In the West Midlands there meets us a wholly different  
feeling—a feeling of reverence and love for Old English  
methods and the Old English tongue, now threatened with  
a worse overthrow than even in the darkest era of sup-  
pression. Patriots availed themselves of their larger  
political liberty —analogous to what would have been called  
some centuries after liberty of the press—to propagate the  
speech of Alfred, if not on the side of syntax, at any rate  
as regards vocabulary and rhythm. The language they  
employ abounds in archaisms, and probably represents—

in contradistinction to Chaucer's courtly compromise—the 'outlandish' dialect actually used in the least contaminated circles of the West. The experiment depended for its success on a more emphatic assertion of the English element than consisted with an amicable settlement of the race difficulty. Accordingly, it failed to achieve more than a transitory vogue.

Side by side with the *Canterbury Tales*, the poems—lyric, didactic, romantic—appear tainted with artificiality. This mode of regarding them is, however, speedily corrected by their intrinsic vigour, their poetical effectiveness—qualities which rarely distinguish reproductions of dead forms. In the fourteenth century the tradition of alliterative verse was probably not defunct, and may have been in some quarters exceedingly robust. The relation Tradition? between accent and alliteration, their coincidence in the same words, had been forgotten. The versification had waxed rude and confused. The free movement of the rhythm was impeded by an accretion of interpolated syllables. This—the condition of much rhymeless alliterative verse belonging to our period—suggests popular survival rather than academic resurrection. But there were differences. The bare recitative into which poetry of this kind had practically lapsed was occasionally relieved by the insertion of rhymes. As verse hardly admits of rival principles of construction (as is shown by the paucity of leonine hexameters), the influence of rhyme tended to depress alliteration, to deprive it of all remaining importance. It became ornamental, an 'artful aid' to memory perhaps, but, more obviously, a gratification to ear and eye. If the learned poets who essayed alliterative verse—and some of them were learned—were skilled in the art of Anglo-Saxon models, it is odd they were not more curious in the observance of primitive rules. If, on the contrary,

their inspiration sprang largely from oral sources, the neglect is at once understood.

Let us turn in the first instance to certain poems of the less extreme type, one of which—some would term *Pearl*. it the queen—has been christened in these last days *Pearl*. In the Cottonian MS., in which this veritable gem of mediæval fancy has been preserved, are three other compositions, each with a purpose; and internal evidence—the only clue in this case—points to the same authorship. Mr. Israel Gollancz suggests that the unknown writer may have been the ‘philosophical Strode,’ to whom, with the ‘moral Gower,’ Chaucer dedicates his *Troilus and Cressida*. Of necessity there exists strong temptation to associate unclaimed literary excellence with some eminent name—temptation which has revealed itself in the effort to substitute for the obscure player the philosophical Bacon. Mr. Gollancz, however, has done no more than establish a pleasing possibility, if indeed so much can be conceded to scholarly enthusiasm. The dialect seems to connect the poem with Cheshire or South Lancashire.

The question of authorship must be left to conjecture, and there are other matters affecting the provenance of the poetry which are in the same condition of uncertainty. Of these one of the most interesting is the priority of *Pearl* or the *Song of Mercy*, the *Song of Deo Gracias*, and other like poems, on which, in Ten Brink’s opinion, *Pearl* has been modelled, whereas Mr. Gollancz believes them to be weak imitations of *Pearl*. They share with it the stanza of twelve lines rhyming *ababababbebe*, the origin of which is still doubtful, though the later editor of *Pearl* likens it to the earliest sonnet-form, and considers that its prototype may be found somewhere in Romance literature. The retention of the same rhymes is certainly a note of

Old French poetry, and Chaucer, who built himself on that study, has performed some notable feats of rhyming. There are ballades of his that observe the formula of two and the same rhymes through several stanzas.

To return to *Pearl*. The lines have no even or regular scansion, but each has four beats or accents. The capricious blending of anapæst and iambus—if one may use terms familiar from school-days—results in an exquisite lilt, the music of which is absolutely ravishing. This contenting of the ear more than justifies the rejection of a pure iambic measure, but there may have been more art in the rhythms than the grateful succession of sweet sounds. In this connection one instinctively recalls the words of Coleridge, written under, apparently, similar circumstances: ‘The metre of *Christabel* is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from its being founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four. Nevertheless, this occasional variation in the number of syllables is not introduced wantonly or for the mere ends of convenience, but in correspondence with some transition in the nature of the imagery or passion.’ Apart from the buoyancy of the rhythm, two points in the technique of the poem deserve mention. One is that sets of stanzas are linked together by a common ending. The other, that some, the most important, word in the last line of one stanza is resumed in the first line of the next. Thus, stanzas 97-99 conclude with the words ‘prince’s pay,’ and the first lines of stanzas 98-100 all contain the term ‘pay.’ ‘Pay’ here means ‘pleasure,’ and in the participial form ‘apaid’ the word lingered on into the seventeenth century.



Regarding the poem under its larger aspects, we find it to consist of two principal, though unequal, divisions—a dirge and a vision. In an age when the absorbing topic of emotional poetry is love of a sort that passes too easily into vulgar passion, it is a pleasant surprise that the pearl in question is no coy girl of the Cressid type, loved and lost by an amiable wooer, but an innocent babe regretted by her father, and by him alone. The mother therefore must have been dead. The opening of the poem carries us away into a country churchyard with its many mounds. Shaded by high trees, the holy ground is bright with gilly-flowers, ginger, grom-well-seed, and peonies, whose fragrance lades the air. It is the month of August, and not far off reapers are at work with their keen hooks—symbolical of the great Reaper whose scythe has robbed the poet of what he most valued. He prefers to think of her, however, as a rare and spotless pearl, which has slipped down there amidst the grass, and thence into the dark mould beneath. The stillness is profound, but shapes itself into a sweeter song than ever he heard,<sup>1</sup> and the poet—for that is the sense of it—abandons himself to a luxury of grief. He swoons; and whilst his body is prone over the mound—the little ‘hill’ whither his precious pearl had strayed—his spirit soars into space like knight-errant adventuring into Wonderland. He fares towards a forest, a paradise of delight, where the quivering leaves glisten with silver sheen, and birds of flaming hues make mirth such as no minstrel could repeat with gitern-string. Advancing, the

<sup>1</sup> With the sentiment compare Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*:

‘Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.’

poet comes to the bank of a forest stream, clear to transparency; and the bed thereof is strown with a multitude of costly stones. Not a pebble in it that is not emerald, or sapphire, or some rare gem. Sheer beyond the river rise crystal cliffs, and the poet, in his exuberance of joy, would fain cross the murmuring flood and scale the dazzling heights, but he is daunted. The water is deep, very deep; and no bridge can he find. Then, on the further shore, he espies a gracious maiden, who, for all her glory and high-pinnacled crown, is not strange to him.

‘I knew her well, I had seen her ere.’

It is one of the inevitable drawbacks of a small and comprehensive work like the present to be compelled to omit or abridge much that it would be a genuine pleasure to record at large. The strange gladness that kindles in the father’s heart at this unlooked for re-union, incomplete though it be, the debate and Pearl’s sweet gospel of resignation, the picture of the new Jerusalem after the ‘devisement’ of the Apostle in the Apocalypse, the queenly part Pearl has therein, and the sorrowful awaking in the churchyard caused by the very vehemence of emotion—these are matters at which we can only hint. It would appear fair, however, not to conclude without giving the reader an opportunity of testing the music and the magic of the poetry, in so far as this can be accomplished in a judicious and admirable paraphrase. Would that Mr. Gollancz had been able to copy the rhyming! To have attempted this desperate feat, however, might well have been to spoil all.

‘It pleased Him not I should fling me thus,  
So madly o’er those wondrous meres;  
Though onward I rushed in headlong haste,  
Yet quickly was my rushing stayed;

For e'en as I sped to that water's edge,  
 My haste aroused me from out my dream.  
 Then woke I in that arbour fair;  
 My head upon that mound was laid.  
     There where my pearl had strayed below,  
     I roused me and fell in great dismay,  
     When sighing to myself I said:—  
     Now all be to that Prince's pleasance.

'It pleased me ill to be banished forth,  
 So suddenly, from that region fair,  
 From all those sights so lusty and blithe.  
 Sore longing o'ermastered me, I swooned,  
 And ruefully I cried aloud:—  
 "O pearl," quoth I, "of rich renown,  
 How dear to me were the tidings, that thou  
 In this true vision didst declare!  
     And if this tale be verily true  
     That thou thus farest richly crowned,  
     'Tis well with me in this dungeon of woe,  
     That thou art to that Prince's pleasance.'"

As has been already intimated, *Pearl* is associated in the Cottonian collection with the other alliterative poems, the names of which may now be given. They are *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Gawayne and the Green Knight*. From what has been said, it is clear that the author of *Pearl* had studied divinity, attracted thereto by domestic calamity, and probably by inclination as well. Such, as least, is the inference to be drawn from the subjects of two of the three remaining compositions. *Cleanness*, the title of which sufficiently denotes its purpose, is a sort of biblical epic embracing topics like the Marriage Feast, the Fall of the Angels, the Deluge, the Visit of the Angels to Abraham, Belshazzar's Feast, and the Tragedy of Nebuchadnezzar. *Patience* is occupied with the experiences of the Prophet

Jonah. The qualities of vigorous phrasing and picturesque description do not fail the poet in his handling of familiar, impersonal themes, but it would be idle to expect the same measure of success where the interest is less intimate and direct. It is some compensation for this inevitable falling-off that the writer possesses not only pathos, but humour, nor can he refuse, for the indulgence of this gift, the chance offered by the incommodities of the dismal Jonah and the scarce less dismal whale.

The metre of *Cleanness* and *Patience* is the same as that of the more famous *Piers Plowman*, to which poem allusion will be made presently. It is, in fact, the normal alliterative metre, with two alliterate syllables in the first division of the line and one in the second. It is not uncommon, however, to meet with four alliterate words, two of them neighbours, and this displeasing redundancy is one of the worst symptoms of degeneracy. *Gawayne and the Green Knight* is also in alliterative verse, but the metre is anomalous. The romance consists of a number of fyttes made up of ordinary lines, but following each fytte is a lyrical burden, introduced by a short verse of one accent, and rhyming *ababa*. The metre is therefore a link between the old alliterative epic and the rhyming romances parodied by Chaucer in *Sir Thopas*.

For some reason not yet fully explained Gawayne was  
*Gawayne and the* in Court circles of the fourteenth century  
*Green Knight.* what Robin Hood had long been among  
the less polished natives—an ideal, a  
favourite topic of song. An imaginary resemblance between the circumstances attending the institution of the Order of the Garter and the adventures narrated in *Gawayne and the Green Knight* supplies a probable key to the popularity of its hero—he figures not only here, but in a shoal of contemporary romances—and serves to fix approximately

the date of the poem, viz., about 1360. The story points a twofold moral—constancy to one's vow and resistance to fleshly temptation, both being constituents of knightly honour. The romance describes a jocund feast at Camelot to usher in the New Year. Arthur and Guenever are come, but the king cannot compose himself until he hear some fresh adventure. This comes soon enough, and in truly dramatic fashion. Clad in green, and bestriding a green foal, a monstrous knight, with great beard, appears and proposes a strange challenge. Himself is to abide then and there a stroke of axe, and his opponent twelve months after is to suffer the like at his hands in a place he shall appoint. Gawayne takes up the gage, and, lifting his axe, smites off the Knight's head. The challenger recovers his head, mounts his steed, and then rides off with a parting reminder to Gawayne of his promise. He is to present himself in a year's time at the Green Chapel. As the time draws near, Gawayne hears mass and departs amidst much weeping. He journeys, encountering bulls and bears, satyrs and giants, as far as Wirral in Cheshire, but not a soul can enlighten him concerning chapel or knight. On Christmas Eve he prays for guidance to the Virgin. Mr. Gollancz has modernized this portion of the poem as follows :

‘O’er a mound on the morrow he merrily rides  
Into a forest full deep and wondrously wild ;  
High hills on each side, and holt-woods beneath,  
With huge hoary oaks, a hundred together ;  
Hazel and hawthorn hung clustering there,  
With rough ragged moss o’ergrown all around ;  
Unblithe, on bare twigs, sang many a bird,  
Piteously piping for pain of the cold.  
Under them Gawayne on Gringolet glideth  
Through marsh and through mire a mortal full lonesome,

Cumbered with care, lest ne'er he should come  
To that sire's service, who on that same night  
Was born of a bride to vanquish our bale.  
Wherefore, sighing, he said : " I beseech Thee, O Lord,  
And Mary, thou mildest mother so dear !  
Some homestead, where holily I may hear mass  
And matins to-morrow, full meekly I ask ;  
Thereto promptly I pray pater, ave, and creed."

He rode on in his prayer,  
And cried for each misdeed ;  
He crossed him oft-times there,  
And said : " Christ's cross me speed !"

Gawayne now descries on a hill a castle, the loveliest his eyes have ever beheld. He is courteously received by the owner, who treats him as a brother. After dinner they repair to the chapel for evensong, and thither wends also the lady of the castle, accompanied by an ancient dame. The interest of the romance now centres in the relations between Gawayne and the fair hostess. The Knight leaves him in her company, whilst he himself rides out a-hunting. A comical bargain is struck between them that, on the Knight's return, they shall exchange the gains of the day. The lord of the castle departs betimes, and before Gawayne is up the beautiful lady enters his chamber and impresses a comely kiss. This kiss he duly passes to the host, and Gawayne receives the venison. On the second day the booty is two kisses, on the third three. On the last occasion the temptress is importunate, and begs for a token. Gawayne has none to give her, but is persuaded to accept her girdle of green silk, which possesses the miraculous virtue of warding off death and wounds. The traveller then takes his leave without informing his host of the charm, and is conducted by a servant to a round, hollow, turf-covered hill, where suddenly arises a dreadful noise, and out of a cranny, armed with a new axe, leaps the

Green Knight. Gawayne prepares himself for his fate, but at first flinches a little. At the second attempt, he stands firm. The axe falls lightly, inflicting hardly more than a scratch. However, the pledge has been redeemed, and Gawayne warns the Knight that, again assailed, he will fight. The Green Knight now discovers his identity, and explains that the small wound is requital of his small treachery in accepting the green girdle. Otherwise he is loud in his praise of Gawayne's chivalry, and bids him go back with him to the castle and finish the New Year's entertainment. Gawayne, however, elects to return to the Court of King Arthur, where the badge of the bright green lace is ever after held in high honour.

Professor Brandl suggests that the 'Gawayne-poet' finally tried his hand on a legend—*St. Erkenwald*. This is the name of a Bishop of London, who is called to a grave opened at the rebuilding of St. Paul's. There he find a corpse in rich clothes with crown and sceptre, who, at the prelate's bidding, unfolds how that a thousand years before the birth of Christ, he had been a judge in New Troy, and had remained thus incorrupt, because he had judged righteously, and not with respect of persons. The bishop's tears, dropping on the model pagan, produce all the effects of baptism. The soul ascends to Heaven, the body falls to pieces, and, amidst the pealing of the bells, the beholders march in procession, praising the Lord. A yearly feast-day for St. Erkenwald was inaugurated in 1386, so that the poem probably dates from that time.

In his *Original Chronicle* Andrew of Wyntoun alludes to a certain Huchown, who, he says, made the *Great Geste of Arthur*, and the *Adventure of Gawayne*, and the *Epistle of Sweet Susan*. The last of these compositions we still have, while it is highly probable that the two former are represented

Scottish Alliterative Verse.



by an Arthurian alliterative poem—the *Morte Arthur*—  
 ‘Huchown’, preserved in Lincoln Cathedral, and, thanks  
 (1320-1380?). to Mr. Perry’s edition, accessible in print.  
 ‘Huchown,’ it is generally believed, is a  
 variation on the name of ‘good Sir Hugh of Eglintoun,’ a  
 brother-in-law of Robert II.;<sup>1</sup> and fifty years ago it was  
 proposed by Dr. Guest to credit the Scottish ‘maker’ with  
 the whole set of poems under review. The claim, at first  
 plausible enough, has been dissipated by the emergence of  
 dialectic differences, and the real interest arising out of  
 the co-existence of the poems now lies in the circumstance  
 that the rivalry between ‘geste’ and rhyme was not con-  
 fined to the region south of the Tweed. Chaucer’s in-  
 fluence on the Scots bards, and especially on their royal  
 master, decided the controversy precisely as in England,  
 and the flourishing of alliterative verse was in both coun-  
 tries limited in the main to the latter half of the fourteenth  
 century.

The *Epistle of Sweet Susan* is not purely alliterative; it is  
 written in the lyrical thirteen-line stanza, combining alli-  
 teration and rhyme. The *Morte Arthur*—not to be con-  
 founded with Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, a much later  
 compilation—is, on the contrary, purely alliterative. No  
 art, perhaps, can invest a slandered matron, however  
 beautiful and engaging, with quite the same interest as an  
 innocent maiden, for there is that in the marriage relation  
 which, as it forbids curiosity, so also implies concession.  
 Susannah’s constancy to her spouse is another thing than  
 the absolute integrity of a girl, and may be defined  
 as happy commonplace, the very antithesis of romance, the  
 essence of which lies in resistance to overbearing conven-

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Henry Bradley, however, has recently impugned this  
 theory, claiming that ‘Huchown’ was an Englishman and his  
 works English: see *The Athenæum* for December, 1900.

tion. The *Morte Arthur*, in which Priam appears as father-confessor, and the figure of Fortune is introduced *à la* Boethius, is likewise not a favourable specimen of its class, the simplicity of which it contemns. But the *Epistle of Sweet Susan* and the *Morte Arthur* both evince considerable skill in description, particularly in the brilliant portrayal of the garden in which the matron goes to bathe, and of the forest-glade where Arthur is warned of his approaching end. The *dénouement* in *Susan*, where Daniel appears as God's emissary, is marked by profound religious sympathy.

Before alliteration drooped and failed, it put forth a great symbolical poem which, though very inferior to the *Commedia*, is yet, as M. Jusserand observes, the only composition of the age that can be made the subject of comparison with Dante's immortal trilogy. Just as Cary re-christened the *Divine Comedy* the *Vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise*, so it is a common practice and a common error to name the *Piers Plowman*. English poem the *Vision of Piers Plowman*. This is regrettable, inasmuch as the title naturally suggests that the writer was one Piers, or Peter, a ploughman, or that he chose this description for literary purposes. Neither alternative is correct, though, as we shall see, there may have been some rude identity between the ploughman of the poem and the poet's own idealized self. The source of the error is easily detected. The Latin title is *Liber* (not *Visio*) *de Petro Plowman*. In strict classical Latin, and here, *de* means 'concerning,' but in barbarous Latin and in ordinary Romance usage it means 'of.' We, too, in certain contexts, employ the preposition objectively, as in the case of Cary's title; but here, as has been said, the effect is particularly misleading. It may be added that *Piers Plowman* contains *two* visions, and, with

the appendix, more. The poet's name is not really in doubt. William, and Robert, and John The Poet. have been selected for him, but he himself bears testimony—and what better testimony could be asked?—that he was called William. It is also tolerably evident that his surname—adopted probably by himself—was not Langley, but Langland. In his poem is found the following anagram :

““I have lived in lond,” quoth I; “my name is long Will.””<sup>1</sup>

We may therefore, if we choose, call him ‘Longlond,’ though little would be gained by so doing. The form ‘Langley,’ on the other hand, depends on evidence totally unconnected with anything the poet or his transcribers have written, and far from convincing, indeed, on geographical and antiquarian arguments. It is, however, needless to labour the point, regarding which there is practical agreement between all qualified to judge.

Langland is stated by Bale to have been born at a little place called Cleobury Mortimer, in Shropshire; and from a comparison of passages in his poem it emerges that he was born in 1331 or 1332. By a similar process of induction the biography of the writer has been, so to speak, reconstructed. He is found to have been by birth of the villein class—a peasant *ascriptus glebæ*. Schooled

William Langland  
(1332-1400?).

<sup>1</sup> B-text, xv. 148. M. Jusserand cites a somewhat similar example from Christine de Pisan :

‘S’aucun veut le nom savoir,  
Je lui en diray tout le voir :  
Qui un tout seul *cry* crierait  
Et la fin d’Aoust y mettroit,  
Si il disoit avec une *yne* (*hymn*),  
Il sauroit le nom bel et digne.’

at the expense of father and friends, he is thought to have studied at one of the universities—how else explain a body of learning not elsewhere attainable?—and to have been admitted to minor orders. Reception of the tonsure was thenceforth his excuse for living idly. The Commons of England did not relish this type of adventurer, and passed resolutions condemning the ‘advancement by clergy’ of base-born and low-born scholars. With these censures Langland himself agrees, which circumstance seems at first to militate against the theory of his own humble extraction—unless, indeed, the words are construed as spoken in irony. Langland may have spoken in all soberness, if, as there is reason to surmise, the loss of his early patrons left him exposed to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the affronts of unlettered prejudice. Inwardly, to use M. Jusserand’s fine phrase, ‘les dégoûts et les déboires d’une carrière avortée’ were punishment enough for any man’s ambition. Instead of rising to a bishopric, Langland seems to have married and sung for a living in a chantry. We have to do, in fact, with a species of hedge-parson—in a worldly sense, a very poor creature indeed. It is indubitable that many incidental allusions in *Piers Plowman* support these conclusions respecting Langland’s sordid experience of the world. He did not find life a bed of roses, or a feast of fat things; wherefore he turned from its thorns and its grit, to mind philosophy and poetizing.

Emerson has observed that ‘as a good chimney burns its smoke, so a philosopher converts the value  
A. B. C. of all his fortunes into his intellectual performances.’ Of no literary sage is this saying truer than of Langland, who, not content with one elaboration of his subject, recast it in two later versions, so that there now exist three separate texts docketed for convenience

A, B, and C. These texts exhibit considerable variations, and by noting the discrepancies it is possible to settle the chronological limits. The poem is a parable of the age, and, with the flight of years, references once pointed and germane became flat, stale, and unprofitable. The events formerly so useful as illustrations had been forgotten; the persons of the historical drama had some of them quitted the boards for ever. The parable was revised accordingly.

The first version was finished in 1362, or a little after, and alludes to the Peace of Brétigny and a fearful tempest which swooped on the land, throwing down high towers and tall houses, and uprooting trees, on the 15th of January, 1362. Particulars of this visitation, which render it evident that the *notus australis africus* must have been first cousin to an American tornado, occur in a contemporary chronicle. Langland is almost equally precise. He adds, in fact, a new item, speaking of the pride of the south-west wind *on a Saturday* at even. Now the continuation of Adam of Murimuth's history makes mention of the hour of vespers, but is silent as to the day of the week. The 15th of January, however, in the year 1362 happened to be a Saturday. B-text differs from the earlier and more imperfect version in several ways—notably, by the inclusion of the well-known fable of the belling of the cat. A French rendering of the apologue by Nicholas Bozon had been published in England about forty years before, and it is curious to find that the rats even then possessed a knowledge of English. ‘Clym! clam!’ say they, ‘Cat lep over dam!’ Langland turns this story to political account. The wise mouse dissuades the rat-conspirators from attempting to kill their enemy, and that for two reasons. Another cat will succeed, and the Scripture has said: *Væ terræ ubi puer rex est* (‘Woe to the land where a boy is king’). It is remarkable also that the

King in B-text declares, 'Reason shall reckon with you, if I reign any while,' whereas in A-text he uses the phrase, 'as long as I live.' These are palpable allusions to the political conditions of the age. If Edward III. were assassinated, his successor would be his grandson. The Black Prince was dead, the great King was unpopular, decrepit, and like to die. As the Black Prince died in June, 1376, and King Edward in June, 1377, the second version of *Piers Plowman* must be placed somewhere between these events. The topical allusions, of which there are many, fully bear out this supposition.

It is more difficult to date C-text. Though there are alteration and additions, these are not decisive as to the time of composition. Indeed, the poet's vision is in this last re-making turned inwards on himself, and wins its chief interest, as a version, from personal revelations. The crucial passage, if one may so term it, seems to be that in which Sir Conscience, in repudiating the Lady Meed, thus addresses the King:

'There's no city under sun, nor so rich a realm,  
Where she is loved and lauded, that shall last any while  
Without warfare or woe, or else wicked laws,  
And covetous customs the commons to destroy.  
Unfitting Suffraunce, her sister, and herself,  
Have made it almost, save Mary thee help,  
That no land loveth thee, least of all thine own.'

Professor Skeat suggests that the word 'city' may have been intended to recall Richard's quarrel with London in 1392, and that the text may date from the following year. He says, however, 'I should not object to the opinion that the true date is later still.' M. Jusserand considers the version as late as 1398-9, when Richard the Redeless had entered on his despotic career. Whatever we may make of

the passage, it appears to be the latest allusion found in the text.

All these conjectures are built on the assumption that the poet exerted himself to bring the work, on each occasion, 'up to date.' This may be granted, but it does not follow that Langland occupied himself with revising it only at long intervals. It is much more probable that the poem, destined never to attain finality, was the fruit of a life-time, and that Langland was always more or less engaged in re-touching it. This may be regarded as proved by the state of the MSS., as there are many differences even between those of the same group. The conjectural dates therefore relate to the publication or completion of the different texts, each of which may have been for years undergoing correction. The best is undoubtedly B, which was written in Langland's prime and represents the maturity of his powers. A is somewhat in the nature of a rough sketch without proper co-ordination of the parts; and in C are clearly discernible the effects of old age—*e.g.*, a tendency to be prolix and to go back on the past. *Piers Plowman* is divided into Passus, or what in another context would be called cantos. These Passus are of varying length, ranging between less than two hundred and more than six hundred lines. The first version numbers twelve Passus, the second twenty, and the third twenty-three.

It is now time to present a brief summary or analysis of the poem, though a bare outline of the 'plot' is nothing less than an injustice to a work which owes success rather to effectiveness of detail than to splendour of design. The poet finds himself on the Malvern Hills. He is roughly clad and might be taken for a shepherd or hermit wide of his cell. It is a May morning, and, tired with his rambles, he lays him down on the bank of a stream, and listens to the music of its ripple.

Outline of the  
Poem.



The pleasant murmur serves as a lullaby, and anon he falls asleep. He has a marvellous dream. High on a hill he descries an artistically constructed tower, and down in the vale a dreadful dungeon, encompassed with ditches. Between these two buildings is a 'fair field full of folk.' The field is a microcosm of the world. It is manifest what has happened. The view from the Malvern Hills—a wonderful view—has suggested the vision of the world. In the field are all sorts and conditions of men, in describing whom the poet is much at home. Rich and poor pursue their avocations just as if nobody were looking on—plough, and sow, and buy, and sell, and adorn their persons, 'as the world asketh.' Beggars and palmers, friars and parish priests, bishops and other men of religion are portrayed with cynical sincerity, and then a king with his knighthood. A lean lunatic—it is shrewdly suspected, none other than William himself—offers his good wishes to the monarch, and an angel, descending from Heaven, counsels the King in Latin that the common people may not aid themselves, but, save for the King's pleasure, serve and suffer as before. This scene is abruptly followed by another, which, however, is not unconnected therewith. Under the similitude of rats and mice the serving and suffering commons hold their counsel. The prologue ends with a descriptive catalogue of laymen—venal serjeants-at-law, labourers that scamp work and sing *Dieu vous save*, *Dame Emme*, and cooks bawling 'Hot pies!'

The poet is bewildered by the odd scenes. In the midst of his perplexity comes a lovely and learned lady, and interprets. She herself is one Holy Church, and explains that the tower is the Abode of Truth, of the God who formed and fashioned us, and gave us five senses to gain an honest living. The dungeon, on the other hand, is the

Castle of Care, wherein dwells Wrong—he who corrupted our first parents. Holy Church preaches a homily on manifesting faith in practice and the supreme excellence of charity or love, the leech of life. ‘Chastity without charity shall be chained in hell.’ Here, at the outset, we have the keynotes of the poem—the worth of honest toil, the curse of those twin-evils, avarice and oppression, and the mutual obligations of rich and poor.

Wrong is the father of Falsehood, and Falsehood on the morrow is to wed a splendid lady—Meed the Maid. The Lady Meed would appear a suitable mate for Falsehood, but Theology objects, and his objections so far prevail that the wedding is postponed, and the whole party repair to Westminster, there to plead before the King. About Falsehood there is no sort of doubt. He is a bad man, and the King, hearing of his approach, vows he will punish him. The wedding-guests now scatter, and Meed alone comes before the King as a captive. The lady is equivocal. She ought to be noble, the guerdon of loyalty, but she has an unhappy tendency to do ill. She can be Reward; more often she is Bribery. Arrived at the palace, she professes amendment, and, in token thereof, offers to glaze a church window. Her repentance, however, is short-lived, and she is soon at her old game, tempting mayors and judges to accept bribes. The King proposes to marry her to Conscience, and she is well pleased, but Conscience replies, ‘God forbid!’ He has the worst opinion of her character, and asserts that she was the ruin of the King’s father, and had poisoned popes. Meed defends herself, but Conscience is immovable. Then Reason is sent for. Riding on his good steed Suffer-till-I-see-my-time, he obeys the summons and with him brings Wit and Wisdom. The King goes to meet him and, as a mark of honour, sets him between himself and his son. The matrimonial suit is suspended

whilst Peace, a new litigant, prefers his complaint against Wrong. Wrong's fellows carry off the plaintiff's pigs and geese. Wrong borrows Bayard and returns him not. Wrong maintains men to murder Peace's servants, and commits much other wickedness. Peace goes in fear of him, dares not fight nor chide, only look. The prospect is black for Wrong, and Wisdom and Sir Warren the Witty admonish him of the fact. The tyrant now bethinks him of his pence and enlists Meed in his service. She offers Peace compensation, and Peace himself pleads for Wrong on the ground that he has made amends for his injury. The King, however, is not easily appeased. Already he has placed Wrong in irons, and instructed the constable not to let him see his feet once in seven years, and he is not disposed to relent. Reason upholds him in this decision, and the King begs that wise counsellor to remain with him for ever. Whereto Reason consents.

King and knights now wend to church to hear mass, and at this point, much to his vexation, William wakes up. However, he has not gone a furlong before faintness comes over him and compels him to sit down. As he tells his beads, he once more falls asleep and dreams. From Westminster the scene shifts back to the fair field and assemblage of folk, before whom Reason appears in the quality of preacher. The late pestilence and the later tempest he shows to be punishments for sin, and bestows excellent advice on Waster, Thomas Stowe, and others regarding domestic affairs and the training of children. His auditors are moved to repentance. In the course of the process they display much—wilful?—ignorance, and much awkwardness as well. Avarice glosses the French word 'restitution' as stealing; and Glutton, ere he abandons his evil ways, sees that he gets well drunk in a London ale-house, and his wife and wench have to carry him home to bed.

The picture of the tavern and its jovial company is gloriously real—as vivid and spirited as the most piquant interludes of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The chief personages of the fifth Passus, in which this episode occurs, are the Seven Deadly Sins, but each sin is incarnate, a replica of somebody. The Gula of the subtitle—it may be observed in passing that the poet, being a learned clerk, is somewhat liberal of his Latin—becomes the Glutton of the section itself, and Glutton is a live person. He consorts with Tim the Tinker and his two apprentices, with Clarice of Cock's Lane, with Daw the Ditcher, and with other reprobates whose names are cited. So with the rest—Wrath, Sloth, etc.; it is impossible to conceive anything more human. And the sense of reality is strengthened by scraps of pointed dialogue, homely confessions. Exclamations are frequent, and Glutton, in particular, pleads guilty to having indulged in a vast quantity of superfluous oaths. Would we learn how the English talked in the fourteenth century? We can find fair samples in *Piers Plowman*.

The converts, such as they are, resolve to visit the shrine of Saint Truth, but know not the way. They ask a palmer, but the palmer, with all his experience, cannot inform them. He has been in Babylon, and Bethlehem, and Armenia, and Alexandria, but never a palmer has inquired for such a saint as Truth. Then a ploughman declares he knows Truth as well as clerk his book, and has served him for thirty winters both in husbandry and in many an odd job. He is not ashamed to confess he works for hire, and praises Truth as best of paymasters. The late introduction of *Piers Plowman*, the most important character of the poem to which he gives his name, can hardly have been designed, and seems to indicate that the work grew, as it were, automatically. Even when the hero has arrived,

there is still something indeterminate about him. At first nothing more than a lowly, kindly Christian, faithful and diligent in the performance of his duties, living and dying as unto the Lord, at a later stage of the work the ploughman is metamorphosed into the Lord Himself. 'Petrus est Christus.' This, too, was probably an afterthought, and not a happy one, unless the identity is to be understood in some high mystical and spiritual sense, as apparently it is not.

However, Piers Plowman agrees to direct the pilgrims, but he has half an acre to plough, and they must help him to plough it. Even the ladies, 'with their long fingers,' are not to be idle, but sew chasubles for chaplains, and thus honour the Church. The discipline proves irksome to some of the penitents, but a grim taskmaster appears in Hunger, who keeps them to their labour. The whole of the sixth Passus is a mirror of contemporary industrial life, and Langland seizes the opportunity to lecture workmen on their vices—notably, their idleness, and love of high pay and good living. Truth now sends Piers a pardon, in which all who have helped him are to participate. Merchants, as they do not observe holy days, are under some disfavour; and lawyers, pleading for Meed, have the least share of all. A priest requires to see the bull of pardon, and discovers a simple exhortation to well-doing and well-having. Priest and ploughman enter on a disputation, in the midst of which William awakes on the Malvern Hills. He concludes by ridiculing pardons and indulgences, valuing them at a pie-crust, and places all his hope in Do-well. At the Day of Judgment all will be well if Do-well reports we did as he commanded.

Here the poem of *Piers Plowman*, properly so called, ends. Langland has told his tale and appended the moral. He has, however, dreamed and prophesied so long that he

finds it not easy to divest himself of the habit. Perhaps also he was honestly desirous to expound still further the meaning of Do-well. At any rate, the phrase forms text and title of the continuation. Do-well suggests Do-better, and Do-better is not complete without Do-best. The precise difference between these three modes or characters seems to have perplexed the author himself. That they denote various kinds or degrees of perfection is obvious, but to define wherein they consist is more difficult. A doctor states that Do-well is doing as the doctors; Do-better, travail to teach others; and Do-best, doing as one teaches. The authentic version appears to be that of Imagination, a new counsellor, who, on account of William's sins, comes to supplant Reason. According to this interpretation, Do-well is, in a large measure, a negative virtue, accomplished in not harming your neighbour. Do-better is Caritas, a disposition to love and benefit your neighbour. Do-best represents the highest phase of godly activity—the spirit that actuates apostle, reformer, Christian knight-errant. Activity in the ordinary sense is personified by one Hawkyn, a baker of wafer-bread, and degenerate apprentice of Piers Plowman. He is a sinful soul, and his clothes are soiled in sympathy, but Patience and Conscience take him in hand, and his hunger is stayed with a morsel of Pater-noster—‘Thy will be done.’

It is impossible to follow William through his many and manifold dreams. Up to a certain point the poem, though it cannot be credited with unity of plan, preserves a sort of continuity. More or less, the story is consecutive. A point, however, is reached where the broad stream breaks up into rivulets. The *Vision concerning Do-well* is, in fact, the first of a series of poems suggested by, presupposing *Piers Plowman*, but only loosely connected

*Piers Plowman*  
and the *Romance*  
of the *Rose*, etc.



with it. Apart from the authorship, common to all instalments of the work, it is the identical phenomenon that presents itself in the *Romance of the Rose*. Both writings are introduced by an allegorical fable; both are pervaded by symbolism. But invention was not Jean de Meung's forte, nor was it Langland's. In one and the other the story-teller is overborne by the moralist. The later and longer portions of the *Romance* and of *Piers Plowman* teem with sermon and satire. A distinguished American scholar, Mr. Marsh, was of opinion that *Piers Plowman*, unlike Chaucer's productions, owed little or nothing to foreign example, and the raciness of the poetry almost prohibits a search after external models. Langland, however, certainly knew French, inasmuch as he quotes two French proverbs, not to speak of the French song which issues from the lips of the lazy labourers. Nor is that all. The description of the way to Truth in the fifth Passus comes in part from Rutebœuf's *Voie de Paradis*, while the stones composing Truth's habitation are taken, some of them, from Grosse-teste's *Château d'Amour*. There existed an English translation of the last-named, but, as Langland evidently knew French, he probably drew from the original. These trivial obligations are cited with no intention of belittling Langland's originality, but to pave the way for the suggestion that *Piers Plowman* has been consciously or unconsciously influenced by the *Romance of the Rose*. Langland and Jean de Meung share absolutely the same point of view. In each poem Reason plays a considerable rôle, and the sentiments avowed by her in the *Romance* are of a kind that William would unquestionably have endorsed. She is severe on Avarice, which vice is insatiable, and makes true riches to consist in competence or sufficiency. This may be found among the poor even more than among the rich. The ease of



poverty, assured by every day's toil, is thus highly desirable, compared with the care inseparable from great possessions. Jean de Meung's attitude towards the clergy, like Langland's, is one of unsparing criticism. Another work the Englishman may have known and even condescended to borrow from is Deguillville's *Pèlerinage de la Vie humaine*, a very popular allegory, of which, as we shall see, Chaucer has translated some stanzas. M. Jusserand is of opinion that Langland is indebted to the *Romance of the Rose* for nothing more than the general notion of a dream, while the many points of contact between *Piers Plowman* and the *Pèlerinage* suggest closer acquaintance. Several of the personified abstractions—Repentance, Charity, Gluttony, Avarice, Wrath—already encountered in *Piers Plowman* meet us again in the older *Pèlerinage*; the Active Man, also; and then, of course, there is the pilgrimage to Saint Truth, which is in very deed a pilgrimage of human life.

The conclusion is that Langland does not occupy that position in literature which has been sometimes assigned to him. Although his rude independence is stamped on nearly every line of his poem, not even William can escape the influence of the then dominant French scripture. More perhaps than the writer of *Pearl*, though less than Chaucer, enamoured not only of the thought but of the literary art, the creator of the Ploughman has been attracted by 'Clopyngel's clene rose.' Langland, however, had not much regard for artistic niceties. He was a prophet with a clear message for his age. What was that message? In the sixteenth century John Bale considered William a Wycliffite. The definition will not serve. Langland's protest was directed not against institutions, but against the hypocrisy of those who abused institutions, against bribery and corruption,

against oppression, against wrong-doing and dishonesty of every kind alike in Church and State. Wyclif went beyond that, but, in so far as *Piers Plowman* is an index of opinions, did not carry Langland with him. In the same way William was no political revolutionist. In the disorders which culminated in Wat Tyler's rebellion, 'Piers Plowman' became a sort of rallying cry, and 'Do well and better' a challenge to assassination. Nevertheless, it is plain from what has preceded—recollect, for instance, the fable of the rats—that Langland was wholly out of conceit with violent remedies, and thought no better of the working-class than of any other. But whether or not we accept the hypothesis of his lowly birth, Langland profoundly sympathized with 'the masses,' and was certainly opposed to the spirit of the Commons, who, in King Richard's reign, thwarted the emancipation of the peasants. Langland was, in fact, an enthusiast. He loved righteousness, he loved charity; and, because he found these vital elements of religion utterly scorned by monarchs and multitudes and those who lived by the Gospel, was led to utter vehement words. Singularly enough, Langland was a prophet, and a true prophet, in another and more commonplace sense. In his *Do-well* he foretold an attack by a king on the monasteries. The Abbot of Abingdon's wound, he says, would be *incurable*. This prediction attracted much notice in the days of Henry VIII., when it was fulfilled. In *Do-better* he records the use of 'brazen guns'—a novelty in Langland's day—by the evil angels in their combat with the heavenly host, and thus anticipates Milton. This portion of the work, embodying a Life of Christ, reminds us of earlier poetry, of the *Cursor Mundi*. *Piers Plowman*, however, is distinguished from these simple narratives by its deeper intent, by its richer, more genuine vein of poetry. It was probably as a tribute to his contemporary that

Chaucer, in his inventory of pilgrims, assigns so honourable a place to the ploughman.<sup>1</sup>

The alliterative school has now perhaps received its due share of notice, but, before the account is closed, bare allusion must be made to a few more compositions in the same style. Of these it is natural to mention first the fragment entitled by Professor Skeat *Richard the Redeless* and included as authentic in his edition of Langland's works. Allegorical in conception, it was begun when Richard II. had been taken prisoner, and ere it was completed, the king had been punished for his lack of 'rede' by being deposed. The poem, therefore, easily passes from its tone of censure into a strain of welcome to England's new lord, Henry IV. *Pierce the Ploughman's Creed* is undoubtedly not by Langland, but the best known of several imitations. The fragments of a poem on Alexander, the *Destruction of Jerusalem*, and a romance, *William of Palerne*, are also in alliterative verse. The last-mentioned, based on a French original, deals with the fortunes of a child stolen by a werewolf and concealed in a forest of Apulia. Adopted by

<sup>1</sup> The poem (in two editions) on the Times of Edward II. may be regarded as forerunner of *Piers Plowman*, both as championing the cause of the peasant against Pope and King, and on account of allegorical elements contained in it. On its prophetic side the work is anticipated by the *Five Drems*, composed on the accession of Edward II. in 1307 by Adam Davie. Davie, however, was a poor seer, as he promised the king the great office of emperor, which he never attained. More democratic, as well as more veracious, is a poem on the war with Scotland, in which it is predicted that in the incessant conflicts the nobility will perish, the merchant will bear rule, and the husbandman enjoy peace and quietness. This prediction, hazarded in the last years of Edward III., may be said to have been realized in the War of the Roses. Another attempt is a history of Thomas Erceldoune, dead a century before, which assures Henry IV. of successes foretold to the Scottish sage by an elf.

a shepherd, and afterwards by the Emperor of Rome, the hero finally attains the imperial dignity. The two *Alexander* fragments must be carefully distinguished from the south-eastern rhyming romance *Alisaunder*, whose fabulous character they exaggerate. In the *Destruction of Jerusalem*, also, an apocryphal legend is interwoven with the account of Josephus Flavius. Lastly may be mentioned *Joseph of Arimathia*, founded principally on the *Grand St. Graal*, in which the miraculous story of the Holy Grail is localized in the neighbourhood of Glastonbury.

## CHAPTER III.

### PROSE.

THE Age of Chaucer was not conspicuous for achievements in prose. The only writers to attain distinction in this, as it seems to us, simpler art were 'Maundeville' and Wyclif, but neither Wyclif nor 'Maundeville' can be deemed great artists. Their fame arises partly from extraneous causes, partly from the rudimentary condition in which prose found itself, and lack of serious competition. This last reason applies to all forms of literary composition in that early period. Speaking of Robert Mannyng's ambition to immortalize his name, Ten Brink observes very truly that this was 'a goal which to the man of the fourteenth century was far more easily attainable than to the man of the nineteenth.' How many charming books of travel, how many learned and eloquent translations are doomed to an oblivion from which the works of those pioneers are eternally secure!

It was long the fashion to style Maundeville the 'father of English prose.' About his existence in the flesh there was not the shadow of a doubt. And in the case of uncritical readers, such confidence was certainly not unjustifiable. The writer gives a clear and satisfactory account of himself, and of the circumstances in which his work was undertaken, all in that tone of innocence and

simplicity which makes scepticism appear sinful. This is the conclusion of the book :

‘And I, John Maundeville, knight abovesaid (although I be unworthy), that departed from our countries and passed the sea the year of grace 1322, that have passed many lands, and many isles and countries, and searched many full strange places, and have been in many a full good honourable company, and at many a fair deed of arms (albeit that I did none myself, for mine unable insuffisance), now I am come home (maugre myself) to rest : for “gowtes artetykes,” that me distraign, they define the end of my labour, against my will (God knoweth). And thus taking solace in my wretched rest, recording the time passed, I have fulfilled these things, and put them written in this book, as it would come into my mind, the year of grace 1356 in the 34 year that I departed from our countries. Wherefore I pray to all the readers and hearers of this book, if it please them, that they would pray to God for me : and I shall pray for them.’

In the prologue to the *Voyage and Travel* the same person had stated that he was born in England, in the town of St. Albans, and that he passed the sea on Michaelmas Day. He adds : ‘I have put this book out of Latin into French, and translated it again out of French into English that every man of my nation may understand it.’

All this is distinctly at variance with the facts, as they are now known to us. Sir John Maundeville  
 The Facts. is a myth ; there never was such a person.  
 As for the book, it was not first written in Latin, though, if the author had been an Englishman, the custom of the period would have rendered that course natural. Neither is it true that the translation was made from French into English by the original writer, since the latter could hardly have mistaken his own meaning. The fact is that this is, intentionally or unintentionally, one of

the greatest frauds ever imposed on the human mind. The professed object of the work is to provide contemporary pilgrims with directions to the Holy Sepulchre and other consecrated places; but it has been expanded, by the insertion of boundless irrelevancies, into a book of wonders, the like of which the world had never yet seen. Even Marco Polo was far inferior in popularity to the imaginary Maundeville, who was to readers of the fourteenth and following centuries what Robinson Crusoe has been to generations of schoolboys since his creation by Defoe.

The true author of the *Travels* was a Frenchman variously known as Jean de Bourgogne and Jean à la Barbe. He was a physician and wrote on the plague, a further analogy between him and Defoe. He died in 1372 at Liège, and his tomb was still to be seen until late in the eighteenth century, when, with so many memorials of the past, it was cast into the melting-pot of the French Revolution. The *Travels* may have been written not long before the death of Jean de Bourgogne, for the earliest known manuscript in French is dated 1371. The English translation was made after 1377, and completed and revised by two independent editors in the first quarter of the fifteenth century.

The probability is that Jean de Bourgogne was as little of a traveller as Sir John Maundeville, and that in distinguishing between the things the worthy knight has seen and those he knows only by hearsay, the writer adopts a device that naturally suggests itself to Swifts and Defoes, for lending plausibility to his story. It is a cause of suspicion that in regard to certain information he  
Sources. supports himself by appeals to Pliny. But he has not limited his researches to Pliny. He has diligently examined the works of Marco Polo, of Odoric of Pordenone, of Albert d'Aix, of Pierre Comestor, Jacques de Vitry, and a Teutonic knight, Wilhelm von Boldensele.



He has made, in fact, a journey round his room rather than round the world; and it is out of materials collected by more daring spirits that he has compiled what is even now regarded by many students as, in some measure, an original book of travel.

Speaking of the Perilous Valley, Maundeville states that there were with him 'two worthy men, friars of Lombardy, who said if any man would enter they would go in with us.' Here he appears to refer to Odoric and his Irish companion, both genuine explorers. To the writers already mentioned must be added the princely Armenian monk Hayton, and the Franciscan friar, Giovanni di Plano Carpini, the original of Prester John.

It is remarkable that elements of knowledge which it has been the practice to consider peculiar Anticipations. to later generations are to be found in Maundeville's Travels, and, having regard to the immense vogue of the book, must have been quite common stock in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The existence and use of the cotton-plant, artificial incubation, the mariner's compass, the rotundity of the earth, were among the physical and scientific revelations. The country of the Five Thousand Islands was an adumbration of Oceana; and the writer is so far in advance of his time that he can believe that people at the Antipodes do not fall off the globe, and that a ship can return to its point of departure by keeping a straight line. Historically, this was no new idea or discovery, since Eratosthenes, in the second century B.C., had arrived so far; but the acceptance of the belief is still remarkable, when we consider the body of nautical and scientific opinion arrayed against Columbus. Thus 'Maundeville' may be said to have anticipated Dr. Lardner's 'Library of Entertaining Knowledge.' Whether he paid more heed to entertainment

or instruction is a question that depends on a circumstance about which we are unfortunately in the dark—namely, the character and disposition of the author. It is possible, if not probable, that he was as credulous and uncritical as any of his readers. Equally difficult is it to decide whether his work should be condemned as plagiarism, or praised as an ingenious mode of popularizing knowledge. Certainly, the heinousness of plagiarism was not understood in the Middle Ages, nor again was scientific truth as keenly sought after and appreciated as in these days. The spirit of romance, indeed, invaded the domain of science no less than the domain of history.

If, in the light of modern criticism, we may no longer speak of Sir John Maundeville as the Father of English Prose, the fact remains that the *Voyage and Travel* called by his name is the earliest of our prose classics, at least as regards secular literature. The work, it is true, has been shown to be only a translation, but the merit and value of good translations vary considerably. To-day the translator of a foreign memoir would find it hopeless to secure for his version a place in his country's classics, because ability to write prose, and excellent prose, is now a common accomplishment. In the fourteenth century only Latin prose was deemed worth cultivating. If a man had anything to say, and desired to say that anything in the vulgar tongue, he instinctively turned to verse as the sole—at any rate, the best—means of attracting attention. Hence the anomaly of historical compositions like *The Bruce* and the chronicles of the two Roberts being committed to rhyme, with all the insidious effects that naturally flowed from the association of rhyme with the less serious side of literary study. Nothing is more significant of this tendency to despise, distrust, and dispense with prose than

The First Prose  
Classic.

the existence of a poetical fragment based on the Travels entitled *The Communing of Sir John Maundeville and the Great Soldan*.

The complete prose version of the Travels broke down this tradition by proving that prose could be made an agreeable vehicle for imparting information in English as well as in French. In order to prove that it was needful that the style should be simple, and limpid, and flowing. The *Voyage and Travel* has each of these qualities, and is pleasant to read, because it is full of animation. Though not untouched with the familiarity of a grandfather's tale, the manner is uncommonly easy, and, to judge from other experiments in prose, this was precisely the precedent to set for contemporaries. The peril was that prose, when it came to be adopted, would be moulded by writers accustomed to Latin models, and superior to colloquial uses as wanting in dignity. This peril was not entirely avoided, but meanwhile the appearance of Maundeville's Travels provided a useful counterpoise. M. Jusserand distinguishes Froissart from other early prose-writers by claiming that in him the artist has already arrived. It is impossible to advance a similar claim for the writer under review, but one has always a feeling that he knows what he is at. As an instance of rudimentary style we may take such a sentence as the following: 'And although it be clept a sea, it is no sea, nor it toucheth to none other sea; but it is a lake, the greatest of the world.' It is obvious that the writer has, and is sensible that he has, his readers well in tow. By consecutive negations and deliberate dribbling he keeps the interest tense until the final clause, which forms an appropriate and, as it were, unexpected climax.

Another translator, whose name has been preserved, but some of whose chief works appear to have perished, was

John of Trevisa, Vicar of Berkeley in Gloucestershire, and chaplain to Thomas, Lord Berkeley, for whom he produced an English version of Higden's *Polychronicon*. In dealing with works of this nature one is tempted to consider them purely as specimens of prose, and to ignore their worth or unworth as translations. This is because in the infancy of prose literal accuracy is a small matter compared with literary facility; and Higden's *Polychronicon*, for us at all events, is rather a *magnum opus* than a masterpiece. Nobody now is concerned at its misinterpretation. To John of Trevisa, it is easy to understand, the subject presented itself in a different light. He looked on his task as necessarily one of much difficulty, and openly avowed his own limitations. 'Though I can speak, read, and understand Latin,' he says, 'there is much Latin in these books of Chronicles that I cannot understand, neither thou, without studying, advisement, and looking of other books.' And yet Higden's Latin is not hard. Perhaps the explanation of John of Trevisa's failures in translation—it were severe to tax the good vicar with dullness—is to be found in a wide range of interests. His version of the *Polychronicon*, destined to be published by Caxton—'a little embellished from the old making'—was finished in 1387. Eleven years later he completed another translation—that of Bartholomew the Englishmen's encyclopædia of science, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. Caxton is responsible for stating that Trevisa performed a still more notable achievement by Englishing the Old and New Testaments. If this work ever existed—it is pardonable to feel scepticism on the point—it has vanished; not a rack has been left behind.

John of Trevisa writes in the Southern dialect, and his English, though it has no high literary merit, is certainly

racy. Instead of quoting a passage translated from Higden, we may adduce as a specimen an interpolation of his own, wherein he brings his author 'up to date':

'This manner was much used before the first murrain, and is since somedeal changed. For John Cornwall, a master of grammar, changed the lore in grammar-school and construction of French into English; and Richard Pencrych learned that manner teaching of him and other men of Pencrych; so that now, the year of our Lord a thousand three hundred four score and five, of the second King Richard after the conquest nine, in all the grammar-schools of Engelond, children leaveth French, and construeth and learneth on English, and hath thereby advantage in one side, and disadvantage in another; their advantage is, that a (*i.e.*, they) learneth their grammar in less time than children were wont to do:—disadvantage is that now children of grammar-school cunneth no more French than can their left heel, and that is harm for them, if a shall pass the sea and travel in strange lands, and in many case also.

'Also gentlemen hath now much left for to teach their children French.'

The custom of omitting the definite article still prevails in the West of England, and has been duly observed by the late Mr. Blackmore in *Lorna Doone*—'And when we came to hog-pound, she turned upon me suddenly,' etc.

In his essay *On the Prose Style of Poets* Hazlitt remarks:

'I have but an indifferent opinion of the Poet's Prose. prose-style of poets: not that it is not sometimes good, nay, excellent; but it is never the better, and generally the worse, from the habit of writing verse. Poets are winged animals and can cleave the air, like birds, with ease to themselves and delight to the beholders, but, like those "feathered, two-legged things," when they light upon the ground of prose and matter-of-fact, they seem not to have the same use of their feet. What is a little extraordinary, there is a want of *rhythmus*

and cadence in what they write without the help of metrical rules. Like persons who have been accustomed to sing to music, they are at a loss in the absence of the habitual accompaniment and guide to their judgment.' Whatever may be said in support of this thesis generally—for evidence and argument thereupon the reader is referred to the *Plain Speaker*—it is incontestable that it applies with much force to the case of Chaucer, who, with all his merits as a poet, was a tolerably bad prose-writer. The comparison was obvious enough, but, as a literary coincidence, it may not be amiss to cite M. Jusserand's words in relation to Chaucer: 'Habitué à la poésie, il s'embourbe dans la prose; il s'arrête au moindre obstacle; lui faut les chemins de l'air. Les oiseaux de haut vol sont mauvais marcheurs.'

Chaucer's prose works comprise a translation of Boethius, a *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, addressed to his son Lewis, the *Tale of Melibeus*, and the *Parson's Tale*. The first of these writings possesses exceptional interest on more than one account—chiefly perhaps because it connects the great singer of the English renaissance with the great Alfred. The connection, however, probably—almost certainly—consisted wholly and solely in community of subject. If, as John of Trevisa tells us, the difference between Northern and Southern English was so great that Northerners and Southerners could hardly understand each other, and Midlanders even less, it is equally the case that Anglo-Saxon literary traditions had no influence on courtly writers under the Plantagenets, except in alliterative romance. Thus we cannot imagine that Chaucer was led to translate the *Consolation of Philosophy* by the abstract knowledge (if he possessed so much) that he would have as his predecessor the most able and learned of English monarchs down to

Chaucer's  
Experiments.

his own time. The explanation of his undertaking what has been termed a task-work must be sought elsewhere. At the end of his career Chaucer is said to have thanked God that he had helped to make Boethius read. Nevertheless, it is not likely that he was actuated by any pious motive. It is to be conjectured, rather, that, in some temporary depression of mind and circumstances—seemingly about the year 1380—he turned aside from original composition and devoted himself to the study of a work which, to the mediæval mind, was of unparalleled importance and attraction. Since Alfred's day there had been several translations into modern tongues, though not into English; and the author of one of these translations was Jean de Meung. It is quite possible, therefore, that Chaucer may have been acquainted with Boethius from a very early period. But it did not much matter whither he directed his mental vision; he was sure to find evidence of consideration. If he opened Dante, he would find St. Thomas Aquinas praising the pagan philosopher in terms like these:

‘Now, if thy mind’s eye pass from light to light  
Upon my praises following, of the eighth  
Thy thirst is next. The saintly soul that shows  
The world’s deceitfulness, to all who hear him,  
Is, with the sight of all the good, that is,  
Blest there.’<sup>1</sup>

The truth is, Boethius appealed to mediæval taste in several different ways. The men of the Middle Ages loved middlemen. They did not know Homer; they knew Dictys and Dares. They did not read Livy; they read Orosius, and doubtless esteemed him better. Similarly, they neglected Plato, and studied Boethius. Direct access to the noblest

<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso*, canto x., l. 118 (Cary's translation).



fruits of ancient literature appeared to their timid apprehension closed. They hesitated to draw nigh, lest by so doing they might acquire a love for that poetry and that philosophy which had proved so grave a stumbling-block to the young Augustine. Boethius, on the other hand, they had by posthumous conversion adopted into the household of faith. Many no doubt found it hard to realize that he was not a presbyter as truly as Orosius. He had written in depreciation of the world and of worldly desires. He had suffered cruel martyrdom by order of Theodoric. This was to be a saint. There was no real Christianity in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, but Christianity was read into the treatise, and indeed written into it. In King Alfred's version the City of Truth becomes the Heavenly Jerusalem, and the higher divine essences angels. To all intents the work was a sacred classic, revered throughout Christendom; and in rendering it into English, Chaucer may have felt that he was performing a public duty and dignifying his native speech with a rich treasure of philosophical lore.

Of the translation itself it is not necessary to say much.

Methods of  
Translation.

Like John of Trevisa, Chaucer commits frequent errors—some of them very odd. For example, '*Fugiens periculosam Sortem sedis amœnæ, Humili domum memento, Certus figere saxo,*' is translated, in violation not only of sense and grammar, but of the very Latin order, which has so often the tendency to mislead the novice: 'Forthy (*wherefore*) if thou wilt flee the perilous adventure, that is to say of the world, have mind certainly to fix thy house of a merry site in a low stone.' The construing, it will be observed, is in more than one point unsatisfactory, and would be a perilous adventure for the proverbial fourth-form boy who could serve up nothing better. There is

plenty of 'that is to say' in the version, which partakes of the nature of commentary. In some places it is commentary confest. Thus, having had occasion to refer to the 'manners of the boiling Euripe,' he adds: 'Glosa, Euripe is an arm of the sea that ebbeth and floweth, and sometime the stream is on one side and sometime on the other.' Herein Chaucer emulates Alfred, who, when Boethius mentions Cicero, explains that the orator was sometimes called Marcus, and by others Tullius. The chief singularity of the later translation still remains to be told. John of Trevisa, *vis-à-vis* with Latin verse, first continues to write prose, but, after a vain struggle, drops into disorderly rhyme. Now the *Consolation of Philosophy* is a medley of prose and verse, a sort of composition as old as Cicero and technically described as *satura Menippæa*. It is a mysterious circumstance that Chaucer, who, it might be thought, would have welcomed the opportunity of turning the metra into more mellifluous verse, contents himself with rubrics in the shape of first Latin lines. That he abstained from a sense of inability is disproved by the clearest of demonstrations—namely, embodied passages of Boethius in *Troilus and Cressida*, the *Knight's Tale*, and in several shorter poems.

Alfred sought to appropriate Boethius in a religious and national sense. The Latin writer asks:

'Where are now the bones of staunch Fabricius?'

and the English monarch, without *diablerie*, interprets:

'Where are now the bones of the wise smith Weland?'

Chaucer may have been no less patriotic, but in the case of a poet the personal factor is always of more account than in that of a statesman, whose reputation is necessarily bound up with large general interests. The poet, if he is

to affect the common weal, must achieve his end, not by way of direct and definite measures, but by way of conscious self-improvement. In so far as Chaucer aimed at bettering the people, he played the statesman, but there is little trace of any such purpose in his writings. If ever he thought of himself in constant ethical relation to the nation, he thought of himself as *leaven*. His ordinary pose, however, was strikingly different. He was an artist first, interested in all phases of humanity; and this attitude of bland observation hardly accorded with strong moral bias, which, in point of fact, was not characteristic of the man.

The *Consolation of Philosophy* furnished Chaucer with a cosmic principle he found it easy to assimilate. The poet who had discoursed so often and in so varied strains of human love seized with avidity on the notion that love is a universal law, the bond which links the elements of the world into an harmonious whole.

‘For with that fairè chain of love he bond  
The fire, the water, the air, and eke the lond,  
In certain boundès that they may not flee.’

These lines are taken from the *Knight's Tale*, but the theory is expounded in *Troilus and Cressida*, where also we meet with a discussion of fate and foreknowledge. Boethius' influence is nowhere more apparent than in a series of admirable poems entitled the *Former Age*, *Fortune*, *Truth*, and *Gentillesse*. The last is a moral ballade, and insists that nobility is a moral quality, not an appanage of birth or mere conventional worth. Boethius' sentiments on this subject had been translated by Chaucer thus: ‘For if the name of gentillesse be referred to renown and clearness of lineage, then is gentle name but a foreign thing, that is to say, to them that

glorify them of their lineage. For it seemeth that gentillesse be a manner praising that cometh of desert of ancestors.' How much more effectively Chaucer drives home the lesson in his easy and elegant verse!

'The firstë stock, father of gentillesse—  
 What man that claimeth gentle for to be  
 Must follow his trace, and all his wittës dress  
 Virtue to sue (*pursue*) and vices for to flee.  
 For unto virtue longeth dignity,  
 And not the rèveise, safely dare I deem,  
 All wear he mitre, crown, or diademe.'

It is significant that the two Canterbury tales in prose are both moral. They are tales only by courtesy, for even the story of Melibeus is utterly swamped by long discourses, wherewith that unfortunate man is brought by his wise, good, patient, forgiving wife into wholesome condition of soul. There is close affinity between the *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *Tale of Melibeus*, Chaucer's own contribution, after the 'explosion' of *Sir Thopas*, to the entertainment of the pilgrims. Translated from the French treatise, *Le Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*, it constitutes an abridgment of Albertano da Brescia's Latin *Book of Consolation and Counsel*. If Philosophy had instructed the fallen statesman and philosopher, Prudence fulfils the same part for her not over-gifted husband. The tale opens as follows:

'A young man called Melibeus, mighty and rich, begat upon his wife, that was called Prudence, a daughter which that called was Sophie. Upon a day befell that he is went into the fields him to play. His wife and daughter eke hath he left inwith his house, of which the doors were fast shut. Three of his old foes have it espied, and set ladders to the walls of his house, and by the windows be entered, and beaten his wife and wounded his daughter with five mortal wounds, in five sundry

places, that is to say, in her feet, in her hands, in her ears, in her nose, and in her mouth ; and left her for dead and went away.

‘ When Melibeus returned was into his house and saw all this mischief, he, like a man mad, rending his clothes, gan weep and cry. Prudence his wife, as far forth as she durst, besought him of his weeping to stint. But not forthy (*notwithstanding*) he gan to cry ever longer the more.’

The remainder of the story is soon told. Melibeus, on his wife’s suggestion, assembles a multitude of counsellors, most of whom encourage him to seek revenge. Prudence argues against this course, and approaches his enemies, persuading them to confess their fault and surrender themselves to Melibeus. Melibeus, in turn, forgives them.

That the tale is an allegory is evident at a glance ; and the meaning of the allegory is interpreted by Dame Prudence in one of her many speeches :

‘ Thy name, Melibe, is to say, a man that drinketh honey. Thou hast drunk so much honey of sweet temporal riches and delices (*delights*) and honours of this world that thou art drunk and hast forgot Jesus Christ, thy Creator. . . . Thou hast done sin against our Lord Christ, for certes the three enemies of mankind, that is to say, thy flesh, the fiend, and the world, thou hast suffered them to enter into thine heart wilfully, by the window of thy body, and hast not defended thyself sufficiently against their assaults and their temptations, so that they have wounded thy soul in five places, this is to say, the deadly sins that be entered into thine heart by the five wits (*senses*); and in the same manner our Lord Christ hath willed and suffered that thy three enemies be entered into thine house by the windows and have wounded thy daughter in the foresaid manner.’

It is not a perfect allegory, for the human soul cannot possibly be conceived of as the offspring of Worldliness

and Prudence. It is, however, a man's greatest treasure, resembling an only child, which he ought not to neglect for the pursuit of empty pleasures. The parable resembles, but is greatly inferior to, Bunyan's *Holy War*.

The *Parson's Tale* is a still more complete misnomer than the *Tale of Melibeus*, and must have caused sore disappointment to the pilgrims, to whom the narrator had said :

‘ I am a southern man.

I cannot geste—rum, ram, ruf—by letter,  
Nor, God wot, rhyme hold I but little better ;  
And therefore, if you lust, I will not glose,  
I will you tell a *merry tale* in prose.’

The merry tale is a sermon on penitence based in large measure on the *Somme de Vices et de Vertus* of Frère Lourens, a contemporary of Jean de Meung, of which a close English translation had been made about 1340 by Dan Michel of Northgate, and entitled *Ayenbite of Inwit* (Remorse of Conscience). By penitence is understood something more than contrition for sin. Three things are necessary to ‘very perfect penitence’—contrition of heart, confession of lip, and satisfaction. The two additions, by which are meant, of course, confession to a priest and penance, are utterly at variance with the belief that Chaucer was an admirer, if not a follower, of Wyclif. An attempt has been made to meet this objection by supposing that the *Parson's Tale*, as we have it, has been subjected to large interpolations. The length of the sermon is, to be sure, not inconsistent with the theory ; and the portions not derived from Frère Lourens are claimed to be more evangelical than the rest. Seeing in what intimate relations Chaucer and Wyclif both stood to their common patron, John of Gaunt, it is very natural to look for indications of the

reformer's influence in the works of his contemporary. But, whatever indications may exist, it seems impossible that Chaucer began with pure Wycliffism, and then recast his sermon, or allowed it to be recast, in support of orthodoxy. What was Chaucer's ordinary literary method? Was it not to take some foreign model—perhaps several—and re-fashion it in English? That is exactly what appears to have happened in this instance. The *Parson's Tale* is just Frère Lourens' *Somme de Vices et de Vertus* with such variations as Chaucer thought fit to allow himself. As he had been in contact with Wyclif, 'illogicalities and contradictions,' to use Mr. Pollard's phrase, are merely what might be expected. The sermon, which includes, amongst much else, discussions of the seven deadly sins and of the remedies to be adopted against them, commences as follows:

'Our sweet Lord God of Heaven, that no man will perish, but will that we come all to the knowledge of Him, and to the blissful life that is perdurable, admonisheth us by the Prophet Jeremy: Standeth (*imp.*) upon the ways, and seeth and asketh of old paths, that is of old sentence, which is the good way, and walketh in that way, and ye shall find refreshing for your souls, etc. Many be the ways spiritual that lead folk to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the reign (*kingdom*) of glory; of which there is a full noble way, and full convenable, which may not fail to man nor to woman that through sin has misgone from the right way of Jerusalem celestial: and this way is cleped (*called*) penitence.'

There is ample evidence that the religious laity, the Lollard element in English life, was restive under its restriction, and craved that the whole Scriptures might be translated into English. Proof of this longing is discoverable in the prologue to a Commentary on St. Matthew's Gospel, one of a



mysterious set, the origin of which is profoundly obscure. It was believed by Bale that Wyclif translated it from a work of Clement of Llanthony, a monk of the twelfth century. Neither Clement nor Wyclif, however, appears to have been concerned in its production, and the Commentaries are mainly interesting as makeshifts, as harbingers of the great reformer's success. The compiler of the Commentary on Luke, based on the 'Golden Chain' of St. Thomas Aquinas, gives the following account of his method:

'Herefore a poor caitiff let from preaching for a time for causes known of God, writeth the Gospel of Luke in English, with a short exposition of old and holy doctors, to the poor men of his nation which cun (*know*) little Latin or none, and be poor of wit and of worldly chattel, and natheless rich of goodwill to please God. First this poor caitiff setteth a full sentence of the text together, that it may well be known from the exposition; afterwards he setteth a sentence of a doctor declaring the text; and in the end of the sentence he setteth the doctor's name that men may know verily how far his sentence goeth. Only the text of the Holy Writ, and sentence of old doctors and approved, be set in this exposition.'

The writer of the prologue to the Commentary on Matthew calls himself 'a sinful caitiff,' while the writer of the Commentary on John, 'a simple poor creature of God, willing to bear in part the charges of simple poor men, writeth a short gloss in English on the Gospel of John.' In a sermon on the Feast of Martyrs Wyclif alludes to 'simple men that be cleped heretics and enemies to the Church, for they tell God's law; for they be summoned and reprovéd many ways, and after put in prison, and burnt or killed as worse than thieves.' Of such apparently were the authors of the prologues. It is not impossible that they were Wyclif's own disciples, for, in order to dis-

seminate his doctrines, he established an order of 'simple priests' (*simplices sacerdotes*), or, as he called them also, 'poor priests.' Many of these persons were not ordained, but Wyclif held that, while it was 'every priest's office and duty for to preach busily, freely, and truly the Word of God,' this was not the privilege of the clergy alone. The Hermit of Hampole had already espoused that opinion and followed that course.

When Wyclif complained of simple men being imprisoned, and burnt or killed as worse than thieves, he omitted to consider that this was the natural effect of his own revolutionary views, of which these unhappy victims were the symbols. How came the master himself to escape martyrdom? The answer to this question is twofold. Wyclif owed his immunity partly to his moral force, which made him, as M. Jusserand says, 'quelqu'un,' partly to the distracted condition of the age. There was always at his side some great personage, some powerful interest, or else the populace. By the admission of his enemies he was 'in theology the most eminent teacher of the day, reputed second to none in philosophy, and incomparable in the exercises of the schools.' Fame of this sort necessarily confers influence; and Wyclif's audacity, the contempt with which he treated hoary conventions of Church and State, while it occasioned alarm and took away men's breath, begat respect and awe for his person, for the protection of which the stars in their courses appeared to fight.

This indomitable man belonged to a good family, the Wyclifs of Wyclif in Yorkshire. It is remarkable that he never succeeded in attaching them to his cause; they even regarded him as a disgrace and erased his name from their genealogical tree. At the time of the Great Reformation, two centuries later, they remained constant to the 'old

religion,' and to this fidelity has been attributed their decline. Wyclif then profited nothing by his kinsfolk. It was otherwise with his university, where his talents commanded the greatest admiration. Born about 1320, he was hardly more than thirty-five when he was elected Master of Balliol. In 1366 Parliament passed a resolution withholding the tribute which King John had assigned as of right to the Pope. In 1374 the Pope renewed his demand, and then it was, as has been recently shown by Professor Loserth, that Wyclif was called upon to justify the refusal. Accordingly, he wrote in Latin a 'certain determination.' Wyclif's politics did not find favour with his ecclesiastical superiors, and, in 1377, he was cited to answer for his doctrines. He appeared in St. Paul's Cathedral, accompanied by John, Duke of Gaunt, and Lord Henry Percy. These personages had as little liking for the heads of the Church as Wyclif himself, and the former distinguished himself by shouting that he would drag the bishop from the cathedral by the hair. A mighty uproar ensued, but the citation addressed to Wyclif entirely failed. During the same year Wyclif was supported by the University of Oxford against the Pope, who demanded his imprisonment if he refused to retract eighteen propositions affirmed to be erroneous. The university opposed this proceeding, declared the propositions, though open to wrong construction, orthodox, and announced that Wyclif would explain matters in London. The historian Walsingham, voicing the general sentiments of the clergy, condemned this decision as a grave lapse on the part of his *alma mater*. At the beginning of the year the bishops met in the chapel of Lambeth Palace, prepared to sentence the bold and brilliant innovator, if their hands had been free. But, ere this, the Princess of Wales, widow of the Black Prince, had taken him under her protection, and the

bishops were forbidden to condemn him. From the dilemma thus caused they were rescued by a *deus ex machina* in the shape of the mob, which rushed into the palace and put an end to the debate.

This display of popular sympathy, occasioned by recognition of Wyclif as a patriot and champion of the crown against foreign pretensions, doubtless encouraged him in courses which lost him the favour of both university and patron. His views on the sacraments were condemned by Oxford, and in his appeal from Pope to King he was deserted by John of Gaunt. Courtenay, Archbishop of Canterbury, now took heart of grace, convoked another council, and Wyclif and his followers were called on to retract. So far as his followers were concerned, a reign of persecution followed, but even in this reverse Wyclif remained personally unscathed—tranquil and happy in his rectory at Lutterworth. It is regarded as certain that he did not purchase this quietude by any formal recantation, and indeed his whole subsequent procedure contradicts the assumption. His writings became not less, but more pungent and uncompromising. The ‘Earthquake Council,’ however, as Wyclif called it (owing to an earthquake having coincided with the proceedings), seems to have acted in some measure as a check, and from the year 1382 we do not find the reformer adventuring himself within the capital. It is possible that he would not have enjoyed so calm an ending, had it not been for the papal schism. When at length Urban VI., the Pope acknowledged by England, cited him to appear, he was prevented from responding by an attack of paralysis. Wyclif died in his parish on New Year’s Eve, 1384.

Wyclif was a great Christian idealist, and his great aim was to establish, not of necessity in his own day or within any stated period, but in the fullness of time, a Christian

commonwealth reproducing the features of Christian fellowship in the apostolic age. He resented. Political Theories. with all the warmth of Knox, the worldly power and grandeur of those whom he termed 'emperor bishops,' no less than the temporal supremacy of the Pope. The hypocrisies and extortions of the monastic orders he viewed with the indignation of an honest Englishman, not unmixed with the ridicule of an accomplished man of the world; and he exerted himself, as politician, as writer, and as sectary, to inspire the English people with resolution to throw off the yoke which the exigencies of state and ecclesiastical policy had fastened on it. The root and core of all Wyclif's political philosophy is to be found in a treatise of his fellow-collegian Richard Fitzralph, *De Pauperie Salvatoris*, wherein it is laid down that power of every sort proceeds from God and becomes forfeit when its holder ceases from his allegiance to the Supreme. Wyclif, adopting this principle, gives to it a great extension in his two writings *De Dominio Divino* and *De Dominio Civili*. The former was written not later than 1368 and appears to have been due, in part at least, to the civil broils occasioned by papal insistence on the levy of blackmail. The grand conception it unfolds is that of a feudal theocracy, in which the lords of the world—pope, emperor, king—are represented as ruling not by any inherent or inalienable right, but under conditions similar to those whereby their vassals occupy fiefs. Sin, especially mortal sin, being in the nature of revolt, abrogates their privileges, and their power disappears.

It is evident that this theory involves a practical paradox, since, as a fact, there are bad rulers. It might also be construed as incitement to rebellion. To these objections Wyclif replied by quibbles. Real lordship has indeed vanished, but God in His wisdom suffers an actual sway

to remain which Christians must acknowledge and obey. *Deus debet obedire diabolo* ('God must obey the devil'). Elsewhere Wyclif takes refuge in Stoical ideas of subjectivity: Man, being in a state of grace, possesses all the blessings of God. But this inward felicity should condition external phenomena. All things—wives excepted—should be common. A king having been granted the Israelitish people as punishment for their sins, it is not surprising that Wyclif does not consider monarchy the ideal form of government. He would prefer the preceding system—that of the Judges—as more compatible with existence of grace in the ruler. But of all forms of government the ecclesiastical is the worst. It is intolerable that 'prelates of the Church should, according to their traditions, intermeddle with the cares and concerns of civil rule.' The aggrandizement of individual priests was not more opposed to the spirit of Christianity than the enrichment of religious houses; and Wyclif does not scruple to advise that, wherever such property is abused, confiscation will be of the greatest merit. The treatise *De Dominio Civili* forms part of a collection of essays, which has for title *Summa in Theologia*. These essays, which deal with God's rule and Man's rule, with the truth of Holy Scripture, the Church, the kingly and the papal office, and the great evils that afflict the Church, Simony, Apostasy and Blasphemy, are, like the earlier work, in Latin, and do not belong to English literature. Wyclif's Latin writings, however, have a very direct bearing on the development of English, since they exalt the authority of the Bible, to whose precepts and purposes the state of Christendom conformed not at all. Wyclif now resolved on a translation of the Scriptures into the vulgar tongue, so that the people, aided by the best light and the best guidance, might work out their own salvation. 'Every man that shall be saved,' he

said, 'is a real priest made of God, and each man is bound to be such a very priest.'

The direct share taken by Wyclif himself in this great and perilous enterprise is somewhat doubtful. It is certain 'hat he did not translate the whole of the Bible, but it is usually held that the original version of the New Testament was by his hand. This version was subjected to revision by Wyclif's friend, John Purvey, who, four years after his master's death, put forth a corrected translation not only of the New, but also of the Old Testament, in Midland English. The translator of the Old Testament was Dr. Nicholas de Hereford, who persevered with his task as far as to the twentieth verse of the third chapter of Baruch. The rest of the Apocrypha may have been Englished by Wyclif or by some deputy. The first translators aimed at literal fidelity. 'Christian men,' says Wyclif, 'ought much to travail night and day about text of Holy Writ, and namely (*especialy*) the Gospel in their mother tongue.' Mistakes might be made, as might also have been the case with the Vulgate. But Jerome's version was the only Bible accessible, and accordingly on this the first English Bible was based.

Neither Wyclif nor Hereford was a skilled translator, as each ignored the vital element of idiom. Wyclif erred not only in English, but in Latin composition, which he made, conversely, too redolent of his native language. One difficulty with which both scholars had to contend was the absence of a recognized standard of style and diction, nor does it seem probable that they set themselves to supply this lack. Indeed, their translations bear evident tokens of haste, a trait with which literary aim or ambition is incompatible. Words were chosen at random, without any regard to their archaic or local character;



and, as has been said, sentences were moulded on the original in utter contempt of English usage. It is easy to forecast the result—a rugged, imperfect version; a version, so to speak, *pour servir*. But Midland English was rising to supremacy, and Purvey was a man who could substitute for Wyclif's and for Hereford's stiff and discordant periods the more natural pose, the better modulation the translation so sorely needed. Professor Skeat, in his Introduction to Wyclif's New Testament, cites some interesting examples of the changes introduced:

'*Mark i. 7 (Vulgate)*. Venit fortior me post me: cujus non sum dignus procumbens solvere corrigiam calceamentorum ejus.

'*Earlier Version (Wyclif)*. A stronger than I shall come after me, of whom I kneeling am not worthy for to undo, or unbind, the thong of his shoon.

'*Later Version (Purvey)*. A stronger than I shall come after me, and I am not worthy to kneel down and unlace his shoon.'

'*Mark i. 30*. Decumbebat autem socrus Simonis febricitans.

'*Wyclif*. Soothly, and the mother of Simont's wife sick in fevers rested or lay.

'*Purvey*. And the mother of Simont's wife lay sick in fevers.'

'*Mark i. 32*. Vespere autem facto.

'*Wyclif*. Forsooth the evening made.

'*Purvey*. But when the eventide was come.'<sup>1</sup>

Both Hereford and Purvey appear to have recanted, in some measure, their Lollardry. It may be worth while to add that, according to tradition, John of Trevisa took part in the translation.

The Holy Bible, though by far his greatest, was not, however, Wyclif's only achievement in vernacular prose.

<sup>1</sup> For the modernization the writer of the present volume is alone responsible.

Fitzralph had been famous as an eloquent preacher in English. Wyclif not merely preached in English, but published his sermons, of which a considerable number have come down. The best known is his *Wicket*, a discourse concerning the Eucharist, founded on the text, 'I am the Living Bread.' Curiously enough, there is no manuscript of this sermon, which was printed first at Nuremberg in 1546, and afterwards at Oxford in 1612, and was not without influence on the course of the Great Reformation. Wyclif's English sermons are short and pithy, and behind the plain text he loved to detect a 'second wit.' His own wit was often exceedingly caustic. Speaking of certain letters which friars gave their clients in order to make them partakers of the superabundant merits of the order, Wyclif remarks: 'By such reasons think many men that these letters may do good to cover mustard pots.' His opinion of majorities—'since there be few wise men, and fools be without number, assent of more part of men maketh evidence that it were folly'—reminds us both of Carlyle's estimate of the English nation and of Selden's epigram relating to Church Councils: 'The odd man is the Holy Ghost.' Among Wyclif's opponents was Chaucer's philosophical Strode, who wrote a book entitled *Positions and Eighteen Arguments against John Wyclif*. More notable, however, is Bishop Pecock's *Repressor of Overmuch Blaming of the Clergy*, published in the following century, in which Wyclif is attacked with his own weapons of irony and sarcasm.

It is impossible to close this chapter without uttering a lament for the able men who, from circumstances or example, buried their talents in Latin, and were thus deprived of a recompense which would otherwise have been richly theirs. How truly pathetic is it that John of

Trevisa. by the mere fact that he wrote in English, should usurp the place that belongs of right to Ralph Higden, the original author! To think also that the brilliant Walsingham should suffer neglect as a writer of bad Latin or serve as material for less gifted historians! And yet they have no claim to be received into the annals of *English* literature, which they did not advance, indeed, much retarded, by their consecration of Latin as the only possible medium of intellectual commerce. The most regretted of those omitted from the roll is, perhaps, Richard Aungerville, Bishop of Durham, and a man of parts and learning. Aungerville, who was honoured by the friendship of Petrarch, wrote a work entitled *Philobiblon*, animated by much of the spirit which was to inform Swift's *Battle of the Books*. The passage in which these companions of pleasing solitude narrate their sorrows—a good specimen of what has been lost—is thus translated by Henry Morley :

‘Yet in these evil times we are cast out of our place in the inner chamber, turned out of doors, and our place taken by dogs, birds, and the two-legged beast called woman. But that beast has always been our rival, and when she spies us in a corner with no better protection than the web of a dead spider, she drags us out with frown and violent speech, laughing us to scorn as useless, and soon counsels our being changed into costly head-gear, fine linen, silk and scarlet double-dyed, dresses and divers trimmings, linens and woollens. And so, we are turned out of our homes, our coats are torn from our backs, our backs and sides ache, we lie about disabled, our natural whiteness turned to yellow—without doubt we have the jaundice. Some of us are gouty, witness our twisted extremities. Our bellies are griped and wrenched, and are consumed by worms; on each side the dirt cleaves to us, nobody binds up our wounds, we lie ragged and weep in dark corners,

or meet with Job on a dunghill, or, as seems hardly fit to be said, we are hidden in the abysses of the sewers. We are sold also like slaves, and lie as unredeemed pledges in the taverns. We are thrust into cruel butteries, to be cut up like sheep and cattle; committed to Jews, Saracens, heretics and pagans, whom we always dread as the plague, and by whom some of our forefathers are known to have been poisoned. Our gentle birth is traduced daily; while wretched compilers, translators, and transformers impose on us authors' names as new. Ah, how often do you pretend that we who are old are just born, and call us sons who are fathers! How do we suffer from translators who presume to turn us from one language into another, not knowing the idiom of either! We are given up, lastly, to painters ignorant of letters, and consigned to goldsmiths, that we, who are the light of faithful souls, may become repositories of gold leaf, as if we were not the sacred vessels of wisdom. The ploughman respects his carts, his harrows, flails, and spades; the retired soldier honours his shield and sword; only the ungrateful clerk neglects the sources of his credit.'

## CHAPTER IV.

### MIRACLE PLAYS.

THE rise of the religious drama dates from a period long anterior to Chaucer, but it was only in the age of Chaucer that the diversion became wholly and widely popular. Until the fourteenth century, or possibly the closing years of the thirteenth, the religious play, and there was practically none other, signified for the common people simply a spectacle. The Latin dialogue bore the character of a liturgy, out of which it was evolved; the performers were necessarily clerks. Representations took place in church, usually on a temporary stage, though in some places—at Holcombe Burnell, for instance, in Devon—the church was fitted with a permanent stone structure known as the *sepulchre*. This description arose out of the fact that the structure was used chiefly or only on the great festival of Easter, in connexion with a spectacular setting forth of Our Lord's Death, Burial, and Resurrection. Everything points to the conclusion that the germ of the religious drama was a ceremony in which the crucifix was buried on Good Friday, and disinterred on Easter morn. Accepting this explanation, the circumstances sufficiently account for the term *Mystery* so commonly employed to denote the mediæval play, though the word itself may be derived from *ministerium*, not *μυστήριον*. A rival and (in

England, at least) more popular designation is *Miracle*, which, of course, is not less applicable to such a scene as the Resurrection of Christ. Attempts have been made to distinguish between Mysteries and Miracles. 'Properly speaking,' says Professor Ward, '*Mysteries* deal with Gospel events only, their object being primarily to set forth, by an illustration of the prophetic history of the Old Testament, and more particularly of the fulfilling history of the New, the central mystery of the Redemption of the world, as accomplished by the Nativity, the Passion, and the Resurrection. *Miracle Plays*, on the other hand, are concerned with incidents derived from the legends of the saints of the Church.' This distinction is purely theoretical, and, though legitimate as a basis of classification, might be inconvenient in practice as excluding from the category of Miracle Plays very many which English tradition has assigned to it.

The Latin plays of Hilarius, written in the twelfth century, are worthy of special note, since they afford evidence of a distinct popular tendency. Such a miracle as that of Saint Nicholas was clearly intended, not only to edify, but to amuse, and we shall see presently that the vernacular plays contained elements of broad farce. For safety a pagan deposits a treasure under the image of the saint. Some robbers make off with the treasure, and the pagan vents his vexation on the image, reproaching and beating it. Saint Nicholas, thus made sensible of his neglect, appears before the robbers, and constrains them to restore the theft. Overjoyed at this result, the pagan shows himself properly grateful to the saint, and is converted to Christianity. The play is further characterized by refrains in French. Similar tags, extending sometimes to short speeches, are found in other countries—*e.g.*, in Germany; and this indulgence was fated to end in the complete

appropriation of the Miracle Play by the layfolk. From the church the performance was transferred to the churchyard, and from the churchyard to the public green; and far from being regarded as means of edification, the custom was considered by the stricter sort at least equivocal, if not unseemly and scandalous. Pope Gregory in 1210 forbade the clergy to act anywhere but in church, and his ruling was confirmed in 1227 by the Council of Trèves. The state of affairs in 1303 is described in a passage of *Handling Sin*, which was a translation of the Norman-French *Manuel des Pechiez* composed a few years earlier :

‘ It is forbidden him in the decree  
 Miracles for to make or see.  
 For miracles, if you begin,  
 It is a gathering, a sight of sin.  
 He may in the church, through this reason,  
 Play the Resurrection :  
 That is to say, how God rose,  
 God and Man in might and los (*glory*),  
 To make men be in belief good  
 That He rose with flesh and blood.  
 And he may play withouten plight,  
 How God was born in the Holy Night.  
 . . . . .  
 If thou do it in ways and greens,  
 A sight of sin truly it seems.’

A resumption of the arguments in favour of Miracles is provided, rather strangely, in a Lollard sermon. Not that the homilist himself approves of the institution. Like other pleaders, he states his opponents’ case only to demolish it. Nevertheless, the apology, which may be epitomized in the words ‘weakness of the flesh,’ seems very reasonable and fair. Miracles were but vanity, but by



that very fact enabled people to realize the vanity of earthly existence, and enamoured them of the meek conversation of Christ and His saints. The spectacle of the Passion moved men to tears, and such tears were worship. Regard must be had for the different constitutions of men. Some are converted by play more speedily than by 'earnestful doing.' If there is to be recreation at all, better to play miracles than other japes. 'Also, since it is permissible to have the miracles of God painted, why is it not equally permissible to have the miracles of God played, since men may better read the will of God and His marvellous works in the playing of them than in the painting, and better they be holden in men's mind and oftener rehearsed by the playing of them than by the painting, for this is a dead book, the tother a quick?'

Soon after the appearance of *Handling Sin*—in the year 1311—an important change occurred in the keeping of Church festivals. In 1264 Pope Urban had instituted the feast of Corpus Christi, but its observance was never enforced, apparently on account of his death, which happened in the same year. Now, by a decree of the Council of Trèves, the festival was ordered to be celebrated on the Thursday next after Trinity Sunday; and in many cities and towns the trade-gilds made it their chief annual holiday. One peculiarity of this feast lay in the fact that, unlike Christmas or Easter, it involved no reference to particular events; the mind was free to range through the long gallery of the Bible story. Moreover, it was a summer festival. The days were long, and Nature herself bade men pass as much time as possible in the open air. This conjunction of circumstances led to an interesting result. The craftsmen, who had succeeded the clergy as performers of Miracles, did not restrict themselves to any one portion of the Old or

A Summer  
Festival.

New Testament, but bent their energies to the production of a vast cycle of plays wherein the whole development of Christianity from Creation to Doomsday was brought vividly before the eye.

While 1311 may be taken as the earliest date for cycles or sequences of plays, the period at which the dialogue first came to be written and spoken in English is another and more difficult question. What evidence is attainable on the subject is inexact and contradictory. The five manuscripts of the Chester plays, forming one of the great cycles, are as late as 1581-1607; but there seems to have been a local tradition, to which allusion is made in the *Banes* or proclamation at the close of the sixteenth century, referring their composition or translation to one Randal Higgenet, identified by some with Higden, the chronicler. The mayoralty of Sir John Arneway, however, when the plays are said to have been written, is dated 1327-8, whereas his term of office extended from 1268 to 1276. A note in one of the MSS. informs us that Higgenet went thrice to Rome in order to obtain leave to write the plays in English, a futile proceeding for which there could have been no sort of necessity. The *Harrowing of Hell*, a poem printed in the appendix of Mr. Pollard's *English Miracle Plays*, has been preserved in manuscripts going back to the reign of Edward II. Although not strictly a miracle play, it is in dialogue, and describes Our Lord's descent into hell for the delivery of the souls in prison. This poem may be considered as marking the transition from the older liturgical drama to the more popular miracle. It may be worth while to add that in many churches the north door is styled by tradition the devil's, and on the tympanum of the north door at Quenington in Gloucestershire is sculptured the harrowing of hell.

Reverting to the topic of Sir John Arneway and his

mayoralty, the discrepancy between the dates may be explained perhaps thus. Before the gilds amalgamated their celebrations, it is natural to believe that they held similar performances in honour of particular patron saints. The earliest—more or less disconnected—plays may have been composed in Arne-  
way's time, and very probably, as mayor or in some other capacity, he may have interested himself in their production. The collective exhibitions, on the other hand, did not begin until the third or fourth decade of the fourteenth century, after which Chester sprang into prominence as a dramatic centre. One result of the Miracle passing into the hands of the craftsmen was intense realism. Realism in the Middle Ages meant, not adhesion to historical details, but precise conformity to existing customs; and the success of the acting depended on the satisfaction of the beholders in this respect. In order to insure technical perfection, appropriate parts were assigned to certain gilds. The shipwrights, for instance, played in the pageant in which God was represented warning Noah to build an ark of wood. When, however, Noah is aboard with wife, sons, daughters-in-law, and divers animals, fishmongers and mariners are adjudged fittest to sustain the task of impersonation. These were no 'amateur theatricals.' The players received a high rate of pay, which at Coventry began at fourteen pence and rose to four shillings. Mr. Pollard reminds us that in 1490 a rib of beef could be bought for threepence—a startling indication both of the value of money and the cheapness of commodities. In any case the labourer could not complain that his hire was not worthy of him. He, in return, was expected to be worthy of his hire. The pageant-masters generally saw to that. At York, however, the Council, deeming it of high concernment to the city that its great festival should be adequately

observed, in April, 1476, passed an ordinance to the effect that four of the most cunning, discreet, and able players should be called before the mayor, examine their fellows, admit those who were sufficient, and discharge, remove, and avoid all others, whether their insufficiency were in voice, cunning, or person. It is true that we are here some way from the age of Chaucer, but the care exercised in 'avoiding' indifferent players was probably not much less in the days when Jolly Absalom, to show his lightness and mastery, played Herod on a scaffold high.

The vast interest taken in the Corpus Christi Play is attested by the elaborate arrangements made for its performance. The scaffolds were commonly known as 'pageants.' The word, which was spelt in a variety of ways, sometimes as 'pagond,' in its primary Middle English acceptation approaches considerably nearer than in its secondary and later use the Greek term—*πηγμα*—from which it has been supposed to be derived. (The probable source, however, is *pagina*, which in late Latin signified 'a plank,' through the forms *pagin*, *pagint*.) It is still more interesting to note that the pageant, which consisted of two stories, a higher and a lower, was on wheels, and thus answered to the wagon on which, according to Horace, primitive Tragedy was conveyed about in Attica. Modern scholars do not readily accept this wagon; possibly the present analogy may induce them to revise their verdict.<sup>1</sup> Be

<sup>1</sup> The words of Horace are :

'Ignotum tragicae genus invenisse Camoenae  
Dicitur et plaustis vexisse poemata Thespis,  
Quae canerent agerentque peruncti faecibus ora.'

A. P. 275-277.

Gruppe quaintly observes: 'This old coach, which has been

that as it may, there can be no question with regard to the English pageant. It was wheeled from street to street, and halted at certain 'stations.' The actors dressed in the lower compartment and played in the upper, where they could be seen and heard by all.<sup>1</sup> Part of the performance sometimes occurred in the street. For instance, the stage directions of the piece in which Jolly Absolom distinguished himself include the following: 'Here Herod shall rage on the "pagond" and also in the street.'<sup>2</sup> There was a constant relay of pageants. When a performance was about to terminate, word was sent from street to street, and every endeavour was made to secure an orderly and uninterrupted succession of scenes, so that all the pageants might be playing at the same time.

The principal series of Miracle Plays are four in number, and conventionally described as the York, the  
 The Literary side. Towneley, the Chester, and the Coventry plays. Our knowledge of the subject is not so advanced as to enable definite information to be given on the mutual relations either of the cycles or of the single plays, but the whole *répertoire* was in the fullest sense public property. If the phrase may be hazarded, the plays were turned out by a syndicate of dramatists, and subjected any changes that altered circumstances might dictate. The main principle on which they were composed was that of providing for each gild a due share in the performance. When gilds multiplied, the cycle grew by means of sub-

fetched from Horace only, must be shoved back again into the 'lumber-room.' See Donaldson, *Theatre of the Greeks*, p. 42.

<sup>1</sup>At Coventry the stage had a canopy, with vanes and streamers, and a standard of red buckram.

<sup>2</sup>In this particular play, *The Trial of Christ*, two scaffolds were needed for the judgment halls of Pilate and Herod respectively, and the players went from one to the other.

divisions. In other words, there were more pageants. When gilds became fewer, something like a fusion of plays became necessary. Miracle Plays were supposed to exist for the gratification of the public, not for the fame of the writer. Plagiarism therefore was little accounted of. The speech of Christ on the Resurrection morning, as it appears in one of the Coventry plays, is copied from the dramatic poem already mentioned—the *Harrowing of Hell*.

This circumstance proves the traditional character of the plays. There was, however, nothing sacred in the traditions, which were due as much to laziness and indifference as to attachment. In some appears plain evidence of modernization. A manuscript had been lost, or a local clerk interpolates a description redolent of his own late time. In a Coventry play, *The Council of the Jews*, Satan, haranguing his lieges, counsels Poverty to take pride in a goodly pair of long-peaked shoes, made of Cordovan leather; hose of crimson cloth, very costly, with a dozen points of kid leather, the tags of fine silver; a shirt of fine holland; a stomacher of clear Reynes cloth, the best purchasable; Cadiz wool or flock to stuff a doublet and—oh, the irony!—‘make thee of proportion; two small legs and a great body.’ All this, and much more, is to compose the wardrobe of Poverty, who shall care not a bodkin for payment. Now the date of this recital can be determined by the fashions enumerated, and these, as Henry Morley has pointed out, belong to the sixteenth century.

The mystery, in fact, resembled a mediæval cathedral. It was a thing of growth, and its growth might occupy centuries. It seems not improbable that these cycles, dealing in the main with the same themes, had a common origin either at Chester or at some other centre. Removed from their first *milieu*, the germ-plays may have received independent developments, may have been overlaid with

accretions, yet not so far as to destroy all traces of relationship. To take individual examples, five of the Wakefield plays—*The Departure of the Israelites from Egypt*; *Christ with the Doctors in the Temple*; *The Harrowing of Hell*; *The Resurrection*; and *The Judgment*—are, to all intents, identical with a quintette of York mysteries; and but for gaps in the former series correspondence might be shown to have existed between other plays. The nearness of Wakefield to York and community of dialect may account for borrowing or interchange.

Although the tradition of dramatic performances at Chester—possibly erroneous—reaches back to the thirteenth century, it is not therefore certain that the existing collection of Chester plays is the oldest. There is a tendency to assign the palm, not only for importance, but for antiquity, to the York plays, which Miss Toulmin-Smith considers to date from 1340-50. The importance of the York cycle rests partly on quality, and partly on quantity. There are forty-eight York plays, as compared with twenty-five of Chester. Probably at one time the latter were more, and in those which remain have been detected signs of fusion—a process that can hardly have been without injury to the workmanship. It is singular, however, if not significant, that, as regards form and metre, the Chester plays exhibit marked unity. Written for the most part in lines of eight syllables, it seems to have been the playwright's intention to confine himself to two rhymes, thus: *aaabaaab*. But a limitation of this sort, especially when one has to treat a great variety of matters, imposes an obvious strain. Accordingly a third rhyme is introduced, and the stanza is reconstituted as follows: *aaabcecb*. The uniformity of the Chester plays ought, it seems, to have weight in deciding problems of indebtedness, and, wherever resemblances occur, should

A Question of  
Priority.



make in favour of Chester. It is said that some Chester plays, and notably that of *Jesus in the Temple*, bear traces of the influence of the Yorkshire cycles, that the Brome play, printed by Miss Toulmin-Smith, or its original, is the source of the Chester miracle on the sacrifice of Isaac. These statements may possibly be correct, but, regarding the matter on *à priori* grounds, the converse propositions have an equal, perhaps stronger, claim to acceptance. However we may read it with reference to the question of origin, the evidence is conclusive as to the interaction of the different cycles, unless indeed copyright be vested *sans plus* in the York cycle.

The Chester pageants included plays on the stories of Lot and Balaam, on the prophecy of Ezekiel, and on legends of Antichrist, none of which is represented in the York series. On the other hand, the York plays, on account of their number, necessarily include many topics untouched by the Chester cycle. Both the York and Chester miracles were played by the trade-gilds. Rather curiously, however, the latter were played, not on the great popular feast of Corpus Christi, but at Whitsuntide. The manuscript of the York plays dates from about 1450-60, and contains, as has been said, forty-eight miracles. Earlier lists make mention of fifty-one and even fifty-eight. Certain plays, therefore, must have been either amalgamated or excised. An entry in the books of the York Corporation, of the year 1378, referring to the plays, speaks of them as an established institution.

The Towneley plays derive their name from the circumstance that the single text in which they have been handed down was long in possession of the Towneley family. As the other cycles have been called, with greater propriety, after the places in which they were respectively

performed, the inconvenience of this one exception does not require pointing out. Instead of 'the Towneley, Wakefield, or Woodkirk Plays,' it has been proposed to entitle them 'the Woodkirk' or 'Wakefield plays.' There was a tradition in the Towneley family that the plays belonged to the Abbey of Widkirk, near Wakefield; and, on the sale of the Towneley library in 1814, Mr. Douce, who compiled the catalogue, gave currency to the tradition. At first the name Widkirk excited some scepticism—there was no such place on the map. It has since been satisfactorily shown that the word is only the phonetic spelling of Woodkirk—an actual place four miles north of Wakefield, where was an actual colony of Augustinian canons. The plays themselves afford evidence that some of them at least were connected with Wakefield and the Wakefield trade-gilds. Those which carry the Wakefield trade-mark in the shape of superscriptions—*e.g.*, 'Wakefelde Berkens'—may be safely assigned to that town, but if there were two or three, there must have been more—in fact, a cycle. The barkers, or tanners, could hardly have indulged in the luxury of a pageant without arousing the emulation of other gilds. What has become of the remainder of the plays? The most obvious answer to this question is that part are contained in the same manuscripts. The validity of this solution has, however, been doubted. The canons, it is contended, copied Yorkshire plays, some of which came from Wakefield, and others—five, if not more—from the capital of the shire. This contention ignores the possibility of Wakefield having the prior right to the five plays, and ignores the consideration that plays in general were *res nullius*. The whole subject is intensely obscure. It seems pretty clear, however, that there existed a Wakefield cycle, and that a series of plays which has been preserved was traditionally

assigned to a religious foundation at Woodkirk. It may be that the plays were performed at Woodkirk under the patronage of the canons. If so, they may fitly be styled 'the Woodkirk plays,' though, if the name 'Towneley' is to be discarded, the appellation 'Wakefield,' as the more familiar, has perhaps the best chance of surviving.

Was it, however, simply a question of patronage? Did not the canons themselves take parts? And may not the Wakefield gilds have supplied the particular pageants to which their names are attached? In the thirteenth century, as we have seen, the Church discouraged the drama, and, as far as the Yorkshire plays were concerned, the manner in which some of the episodes are handled completely justifies the interdict. It is not, however, the case that the canons, who lived under a much less rigorous rule than the regular monastic orders, refused all connexion with the stage. Whether the Towneley plays were or were not enacted at Woodkirk, it is extremely unlikely that tradition was wrong in ascribing to the canons a cycle of their own; and if they possessed one, it is no outrage to believe that the canons performed it. In the case of the Coventry plays it is demonstrable that they were not acted by the local gilds. A list of their pageants has come down to us and does not tally with the existing plays. It is significant also that the miracles in question have never been attributed to the Coventry gilds, but, on the contrary, to the Grey Friars, or Franciscans, of the town. From local records it is known that the friars did, in fact, rival the craftsmen as actors, and in the fifteenth century the fame of Coventry was so great as to attract even royal personages as witnesses of the exhibitions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In 1456, for example, Queen Margaret, lodging at Richard Wood the grocer's, saw 'all the pageants played save Doomsday, which might not be played for lack of day.' In 1486, and

The character of the so-called Coventry plays certainly lends colour to the tradition that their sponsors were men of religion. They are more didactic than the York mysteries, and the gross humour in which craftsmen delighted, and which forced an entry into the most solemn scenes, is conspicuously absent. On the other hand, there is nothing in the manuscripts to indicate that they ever belonged to the Grey Friars of Coventry. They date from the year 1468, and the plays appear to have been invented in 1414. The Draper's Company, however, had a pageant-house in 1392. The sole reason for the attribution of the Coventry plays to Godiva's city is a Latin note on the fly-leaf by Dr. Richard James, librarian to Sir Robert Cotton, who died in 1639. This note declared that the book was commonly called the Book of Coventry or the Book of Corpus Christi, and that its contents were formerly acted by monks or mendicant friars. Scholars like Ten Brink and Mr. A. W. Pollard gravely suspect error. The dialect savours of the East Midlands. At the close of the long prologue occur the following remarkable lines :

‘ On Sunday next, if that we may,  
At six of the bell, we ’gin our play  
In N—— town ; ’

The inference is unmistakable. The friars or layfolk, who had charge of the performances, were evidently strolling players.

While the Coventry plays, according to the opinion of some, are in need of a local habitation, many towns—Newcastle, Lancaster, Preston, Kendal, Wymondham, Dublin, etc.—once rejoiced in cycles now totally lost. The

again in 1492, Henry VII. attended—on the latter occasion, with his queen.

popularity of miracles is reflected in the literature of the age. Besides its regular cycle, the city of York Other Plays. could boast of plays on the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. To the latter Wyclif refers, when he speaks of 'the Paternoster in English tongue as men sayen in the play of York.' It is, however, in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* that we meet with the most sympathetic allusions. One of the lovers, Jolly Absolom—or Absolon, as Chaucer rhymes it—was a parish-clerk. Very unlike the typical parish-clerk of later days, he got himself up as a lady-killer, and cast loving glances at the women as he censured them in church. And, in order to display his accomplishments, he was wont to play Herod in the miracle.<sup>1</sup> The jealous old husband, too, is no stranger to these entertainments, and from the nature of his occupation may have constructed or repaired the 'engines' on which the performances took place. At all events, he knows more about Noah's Flood than ever he learnt from Scripture, and his imagination has been so wrought upon by what he has seen in mimic guise on the stage that he falls easy victim to the wiles of the astrologer. Courteous Nicholas assures him that another, but greater, deluge is imminent, and induces him to provide three kneading-troughs, one for himself, one for his wife, and one for his boarder, the prophet. Without troubling to relate the

<sup>1</sup> It is quite likely that when he wrote this account of the curly-haired, red-stockinged 'admirable Crichton' of low life, Chaucer had in his mind, if not a definite prototype, at least definite scenes. The parish-clerks had been formed into an harmonic gild, which was chartered as far back as 1233. In 1390 they played interludes at Skinner's Well before Richard II. for three days. The date is remarkable, as it coincides very nearly with the time when, in all probability, the *Miller's Tale* was being written. The exclamation 'a twenty devils' way!' occurs in both play and tale.

issue of the experiment, we cite the passage which more directly concerns our immediate purpose :

“Hast thou not heard how savèd was Noë,  
 When that our Lord had warnèd him beforne,  
 That all the world with water should be lorn ?”  
 “Yes,” quoth this carpenter, “full yore ago.”  
 “Hast thou not heard,” quoth Nicholas, “also  
 The sorrow of Noë and his fellowship  
 That he had ere he gat his wife to ship.  
 Him had well lever, I dare well undertake,  
 At thilkē time, than all his wethers black,  
 That she hadlē a ship herself alone.’

In the Book of Genesis we indeed light on an instance of  
*Noah and his* womanish disobedience—the fatal instance  
*Wife.* of Lot’s wife—but the canonical writings  
 maintain complete silence on the moods and  
 caprices of Noah’s help-meet. The craftsman and his  
 companion have, it is plain, acquired their information  
 from some other source, and if we turn to the miracle play  
 of Noah’s Flood, we shall be able to observe how the  
 biblical version was ‘improved.’

*Noah.* Wife, come in ; why stands thou there ?  
 Thou art ever froward, I dare well swear ;  
 Come in, on God’s name ! half time it were  
 For fearē lest we drown.

*Noah’s Wife.* Yea, sir, settē up your sail,  
 And row forth with evil hail,  
 For withouten any fail  
 I will not out of this town ;  
 But I have my gossips every one,  
 One foot further I will not gone ;  
 They shall not drownē, by Saint John !  
 And I may save their life.

They loven me full well, by Christ!  
 But thou let them into thy chest  
 Else row now where thee list,  
 And get thee a new wife.

*Noah.* Shem, sonnë, lo! thy mother is wro(*th*);  
 Forsooth, such another I do not know.

*Shem.* Father, I shall fetch her in, I trow,  
 Withouten any fail.  
 Mother, my father after thee send,  
 And bids thee into yonder ship wend.  
 Look up, and see the wind,  
 For we be ready to sail.

*Noah's Wife.* Shem, go again to him, I say.  
 I will not come therein to-day.

*Noah.* Come in, wife, in twenty devils' way.  
 Or ellës stand without.

*Ham.* Shall we all fetch her in?

*Noah.* Yea, sons, in Christ's blessing and mine!  
 I would you hiéd you betime.  
 For of this flood I am in doubt.

#### THE GOOD GOSSIPS' SONG.

The flood comes fleeting in full fast,  
 On every side that spreads full far.  
 For fear of drowning I am aghast.  
 Good gossips, let us draw near,  
 And let us drink ere we depart.  
 Full oftentimes we have done so;  
 For at a draught thou drinks a quart,  
 And so will I do ere I go.

*Japhet.* Mother, we pray you all together,  
 For we are here, your ownë childer,  
 Come into the ship for fear of the weather  
 For the love that you bought.

*Noah's Wife.* That will not I for all your call,  
 But I have my gossips all.

*Shem.* In faith, mother, yet you shall,  
 Whether thou wilt or not.



*Noah.* Welcome, wife, into this boat.  
*Noah's Wife.* Have that for thy note.  
*Noah.* Ha! ha! marry, this is hot;  
 It is good for to be still.<sup>1</sup>

The freedom and daring here displayed are certainly remarkable, but the *Shepherd's Play* in the Towneley set outdoes even this innovation. No doubt Noah and his fellowship, as they moved on the scaffold at Chester, were made to look very modern, but, as regards the text, the 'improvement' on Genesis is confined to the eternal possibilities of human nature. The speeches do not lead us from the Bible and the East under the overpowering stress of latter-day suggestion. This, however, the *Shepherd's Play* naturally and necessarily does. 'Horbury Shroggs' is too bold a stroke, and dissolves, as by disenchantment, all anticipation of heralding angels and the manger of Bethlehem. The bad taste of this rollicking comedy—for such, on the whole, is the character of the piece—cannot be denied. Nevertheless, the interlude possesses for us vast interest, since in this rustic play we stand by the cradle of the drama which, in its pride of life, was the witchery of *As You Like It* and *A*

<sup>1</sup> The subject of Noah's Flood is difficult to handle. Coleridge has referred to the ludicrous effect of Drayton's description:

'And now the beasts are walking from the wood,  
 As well of ravine as that chew the cud.  
 The king of beasts his fury doth suppress,  
 And to the Ark leads down his lioness;  
 The bull for his beloved mate doth low,  
 And to the Ark brings on the fair-eyed cow,' etc.

By way of contrast the reader may be referred to Milton's more successful attempt in the eleventh book of *Paradise Lost*, in which the sentiments of Noah's partner and the amorous bull find no place.

*Midsummer Night's Dream.* A shepherd appears, full of complaints. He cries out on the cold moorland blasts, out on the gentlefolk who cause the plough to tarry, and rob innocent shepherds of their peace :

‘ There shall come a swain as proud as a po (*peacock*) ;  
 He must borrow my wain, my plough a-l-o.  
 Then I am full fain to grant ere he go.  
 Thus live we in pain, anger, and woe  
 By day and night.’<sup>1</sup>

As though peacock-oppression were not enough, they have in their midst a traitor against his order—one Mak, a sheep-stealer. The would-be thief now enters with two honest shepherds, and the party compose themselves to sleep. Care, however, is taken to ensconce Mak between them, so as to prevent mischief. The precaution is unavailing. Whilst his comrades slumber and sleep, Mak rises, saying :

‘ Now were time for a man that lacks what he would  
 To stalk privily than (*then*) unto a fold,  
 And nimbly to work than, and be not too bold,  
 For he might abide the bargain, if it were told  
 At the ending.’

Mak will not own himself a thief ; he makes terms with his conscience by *borrowing* a fat sheep, and therewithal hies away to cot and wife Gill. The good woman expresses some impatience at being roused at that hour of the night and amidst of her spinning, but, as 'tis her 'sweeting' that knocks, at length opens the door. Gill cannot restrain her fears.

‘ By the neck thou art like for to hang.’

<sup>1</sup> It is worth while to point out the wealth of rhymes, not only at the end, but in the middle of the lines.

Mak, however, is light-hearted. He has 'scaped a good many times, and sheep-stealing is a vast deal more profitable than swinking and sweating. His spouse reminds him that the pitcher, that long went to the well, at last came home broken, and devises a plan by which she hopes the foul disgrace of hanging may be averted. This is to make of the sheep a new-born babe. The creature is to be laid in a cradle, and beside it Madam Gill is to feign child-bed and groan. Mak, for his part, returns to the shepherds, whom he discovers still sleeping, and takes his place as if nothing had happened. When they awake and find the sheep missing, their suspicions at once fall on Mak. Protestations being of no avail, the rogue invites them to search his house. They go, but see no sheep anywhere, and are on the point of leaving, when one of them asks:

‘Gave ye the child anything?’

This is dangerous ground, and Mak does his best to check their awkward interest. He is not very successful. The Third Shepherd says:

‘Give me leave him to kiss, and lift up the clout.  
What the devil is this? He has a long snout.’

On inspection, the Second Shepherd declares:

‘He is like to our sheep.’

Mak and his wife continue to fight a losing battle, stoutly maintaining their parentage, and attributing the child's deformity to an elf. Gill herself witnessed the harm, already foretold by a clerk.

‘When the clock struck twelve,  
Was he forshapen.’

However, the shepherds are not such implicit fools as to

accept this explanation, and toss Mak in a canvas till they are sore. Hereupon they lie down to rest on the green-sward, to be roused by an angel singing *Gloria in Excelsis*. At this point comedy ends, but the sequel does not lack intentional, or unintentional, humour. Very amusing is the shepherds' criticism of the angel's solo—how he cracked it and hacked it and knacked it, three briefs to a long. Not a crotchet was amiss or in default. In the stable at Bethlehem the rude visitors display the same familiarity they would have used to Mak's infant, had he been anything but their own sheep. Their minds are evidently in fine confusion. One moment they address the young child as 'Maker,' and ween he has cursed the wild warlock. The next, they observe,

'Lo, he merries ;

Lo, he laughs, my sweeting,'

and offer a bob of cherries. It must be allowed, however, that the most adroit of playwrights would experience difficulty in combining reverence for the Divine and sympathy for the Human in this unparalleled moment. In fact, only a profoundly childish, or profoundly irreligious, art would essay such a feat. Miracle plays were a marvellous mixture of irreverence and childishness. The spirit always verges on the irreverent: the art, in its turn, is invariably childish. While, however, it seems certain that no high philosophy, whether of art or life, informs the fourteenth-century drama, it may be that the playwrights were wiser than they knew. There is in common human nature an uncontrollable tendency to make itself inopportunely comfortable, to throw off the incubus of the solemn, to take the attitude of a spectator pure and simple, where the loftier mind associates itself with what it sees. On the other hand, common human nature willingly and

uncritically shares an immoral gaiety the loftier mind disdains. In the opening scene of *Julius Caesar* the time-serving cobbler's 'shoppy' jests are succeeded by the majestic reproof of the great-souled Marullus. It is likely enough that Shakespeare acquired this method of sharp and forcible contrast, this irony, so entirely foreign to classical tradition, from the overstrained and inartistic practice during long centuries of his unreflecting countrymen.

At Tiverton in Devon, within a few paces from the spot in which these chapters are being written, the string-course of an early sixteenth-century chantry is decorated with sculptures representing scenes in the life of Our Lord. The subjects are identical with those of the miracle plays, with which, of course, the carvings were contemporary. In point of maturity, miracle plays bear the same relation to the dramas of Sophocles or the masterpieces of the Elizabethan stage as these sculptures—unhappily mutilated—to the frieze of the Parthenon or the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel. The infantine character of the miracle play might be exemplified in a number of ways. The office of the Doctor or Expositor, replaced in the Coventry mysteries by Contemplacio, is a theatrical anomaly—a survival of the times in which the clergy had sole control of the performances, and perhaps a concession to the spiritual element in the auditory. In these plays, however, neither spiritual nor temporal powers are in any way sacrosanct. In the Chester play of *Doomsday* the dead, both great and small, both good and evil, rise and testify of themselves. Among the rest a pope, who had abused his high and holy estate, and thriven by simony, has to give account of souls lost under his rule. He is followed by an emperor, a king and queen, a justice and a merchant—all impartially damned. Even

those potentates who escape this dire doom have not gone straight to bliss. Their salvation has been achieved in Purgatory; and in the case of the queen, who has passed her life in godless luxury, an almsdeed at the last moment has been efficacious in redeeming her from the consequences. Thus the playwright laboured under no sense of restriction. Nevertheless, he could not produce a true portrait of a king. He could only present an animated symbol of sovereignty, a caricature of kingship, a marionette of monarchy. The doll speaks French—very sorry French, as it happens—and demonstrates his authority by loud and frequent insistence on his right to speak, and the duty and necessity of silence in those about him. He utters terrible threats of what will ensue if his desires be not observed, the least being that he will make mincemeat—‘flesh to pot’—of the disobedient. The conduct of the Herod who gave not God the glory, and was eaten up of worms, seems to have influenced the pen of the playwright more than that of any living exemplar, though, as was proved at Calais, there was something barbaric in the constitution of the third Edward, whereof Herod’s biographer may have had hearsay. In the main, these Court-episodes were either fruits of the imagination, or retailed at second hand. The parting speech of Herod, in one of the plays, is significantly frank:

‘Sirs, this is my counsel:  
Be not too cruel.  
But adieu to the devil,  
I can (*know*) no more French.’

There were limits to the patience of the listeners, as well as to the writer’s linguistic acquirements.

It is not only French, however. The dramatists make free and foolish use of their Latin. They put into pastoral mouths unmeet Maro’s imagined prophecy:

‘Jam redit et virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;  
Jam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.’

It is more in accord with the fitness of things that Pilate, being a Roman, should lapse at times into native Latin; but the only obvious connexion between Gylb, John Horne, and Latinity is the slender link of the Vulgate. All this, however, does not detract from the strongly popular cast of the plays. Many a clerk of low degree was capable of adapting them to the taste of his compatriots, who, in return, could tolerate a little Latin or a little French, as *ragoût* for the gentry. Meanwhile the commons are incorporated into the Gospel narrative. In the Coventry play, the *Trial of Joseph and Mary*, the sompnour or summoner to the bishop’s court—one of the types, it will be recollected, in the *Canterbury Tales*—warns those who stand round about

‘That I summon you, all the rout,  
Look ye fail for no doubt,  
At the Court to ’pear.  
Both John Jordan and Geoffrey Gile,  
Malkin Milkedode, and fair Mabile,  
Stephen Sturdy, and Jack-at-the-Stile,  
And Sawder Sadelere.’

The mysteries, as has been already noted, teem with surprises. Anachronisms occur on every page; and, as the history of the race is crowded into the short space of a summer’s day, continuity in a play or series of plays is impracticable. Noah has not been long in the ark before he opens the door and announces that forty days have elapsed. Nothing came amiss, provided that the novelty or excitement of the occasion was augmented. Spectators were blissfully ignorant, playwrights buoyantly regardless of dramatic propriety and historical consistency. Thus



Lancelot of the Lake is imported into Herod's Court, and made to distinguish himself by sharing in the massacre of the Innocents.

An interesting and important problem is the relation of the miracle play to the revolutionary temper of the age. It is clear that the nameless authors, whether or no they were themselves dissatisfied with the established *régime*, were sufficiently familiar with the burrowing discontent, and suffered their humbler personages to avow dangerous sentiments. The shepherds are not the only specimens of burdened and over-taxed humanity. Joseph, the husband of the Virgin, and a commonplace poor craftsman, is entirely of their way of thinking, and the decree of Cæsar Augustus forms the text of the old man's diatribe. During a long life of honest toil he has not learnt how to grow rich—indeed, he has with difficulty earned his daily bread; and now his little all must he pay the king. The question suggests itself whether these murmurings and mutterings, so easily transferred to the evil present, served as a safety-valve or as a stimulus. The festive surroundings of the miracle play—hardly a kindly medium, one would think, for treason—points to the former solution, which is supported by the indifference of the authorities, who would otherwise have taken measures for suppressing it. The expressions, however, retain their value as indications of current feeling.

It is noticeable that the atmosphere of the miracle play is that of the Crusades. The pagans are paynims, and swear doughty oaths by Mahound. They wear turbans. The costume of the good characters is modelled on gingerbread. Our Lord, for example, wears a robe of white sheep-skin, gilt wig, and gilt beard. At one time, it appears, the practice was to gild the face also; but the usage was found to be injurious, and accordingly dropped.

Satan was laughably fearsome. The Chester play speaks of 'the devil in his feathers all ragged and rent'—a bogey to frighten children withal. Hell-mouth was a gruesome contrivance of ample size, the counterfeited of a dragon's jaws; thence issued smoke and flame, and the groans of the lost. Spectacles of this sort, however, seem to have been by no means so popular in England as in some countries of the Continent, and were reserved mainly for the play on the 'Harrowing of Hell.' Certain lines in the old ballad *Adam Bell* may be deemed reminiscent of this play:

' He opened the gate full shortlyë,  
An evil opening for him.  
" Now we are in," said Adam Bell,  
" Thereof we are full fain,  
But Christ knows, that harrowed hell,  
How we shall come out again."'

It should not be forgotten that, as in most of the old ballads, alliteration's artful aid is occasionally called in. The Coventry Herod is especially fond of this device.

' As a lord in royalty in no region so rich,  
And ruler of all realms, I ride in royal array.  
There is no lord of land in lordship to me lich (*like*),  
None lovelier, none lovesomer —everlasting is my lay.'

The psychology of the plays is on a par with the poetry; but it is difficult to understand why M. Jusserand should be so hard on Isaac's childlike request not to be shown the fatal blade. The touch seems natural enough.

## CHAPTER V.

GOWER (1325 ?-1400).

THE life of Gower possesses little more than antiquarian interest. Particulars are scanty, and mainly Biography. disinterred from the public archives. He came of a good family, and this circumstance has promoted research, if haply a pedigree might be formed for him. Let us be content to know, on his authority, that he was an esquire. Born apparently during the third decade of the fourteenth century, he was a man of Kent, and inherited or acquired property in that county, in Essex, in Norfolk, and in Suffolk. What details have been recovered of Gower's career relate principally to manors, to leases and releases, and create the impression that he was a prudent man of business. This quality may explain his abstention from public affairs and the allurements of war. He was never, like Chaucer, a knight of the shire, and his works betray indifference to the martial spirit of the age. He was, no doubt, well educated—on that point his writings cannot mislead—and probably at one of the English universities. Leland made him a lawyer, and others have elevated him to the judicial bench. Mr. Macaulay, however, refers to certain indications in the *Mirour de l'Omme*, suggesting that it was as a merchant that Gower made his money. ‘This inference is supported by the manner in which he speaks of “our City,” and by

the fact that it is with members of the merchant class that he seems to be most in personal communication.' In later life, at all events, the care of his estates and study of books provided him with sufficient occupation, and indeed it is difficult to reconcile the immense volume of his poetry with anything like active participation in common pursuits. He was, to all appearance, a literary recluse in close sympathy with ecclesiastical tradition. His relationship to the Church may have been even more definite, but it is not safe to conjecture how.

In 1381 an event occurred which seems to have aroused him out of his drowsyhood, and filled him with a keen, perhaps not wholly unselfish, interest in what was going on around. The Peasant Revolt is dismissed by Chaucer with a laugh, but to Gower it was the end of the world. A social upheaval of that sort was a menace to his practical interests, as lord of manors, and a high affront to his caste. He instinctively rallied to the side of law and order, and vented his feelings of horror and indignation in a poem that will shortly engage our attention. Although Gower was a rigid legitimist, he found no difficulty in supporting the opponents of Richard when those opponents were princes like the Duke of Gloucester and the Earl of Derby. From the latter, who was to ascend the throne as Henry IV., he received in 1393-4 a collar—it is doubtful whether the same collar of SS. with the silver swan, figuring in an illuminated manuscript and on his tomb. If not, the bestowal of a new collar, with its accompaniment of Henry's badge, must be taken as a fresh proof of Lancastrian favour. Probably Gower never forgave Richard's memorable speech to the mob at Smithfield, and his willingness to enfranchise the serfs.

In 1397 John Gower, an old man in feeble health, took to wife Agnes Groundolf. As there was no evidence of any

earlier marriage, it was assumed by Dr. Pauli and others that it was only when he had reached the age of three score years and ten that he became weary of bachelorship. Mr. Macaulay believes that Gower was then a widower. 'We may perhaps gather from ll. 1794 and 17649 [of the *Mirour de l'Homme*] that he had a wife. In the former passage he is speaking of those who tell tales to husbands about their wives' misconduct, and he says in effect, "I for my part declare (*Je di pour moi*) that I wish to hear no such tales of *my* wife"; in the second he speaks of those wives who dislike servants and other persons simply because their husbands like them, and he adds, "I do not say that mine does so (*ne di pas qu'en si fait la moie*)." If the inference is correct, then his union with Agnes Groundolf in his old age was a second marriage, and this is in itself probable enough.' His circumstantial will makes no mention of children, but contains ample acknowledgment of the fostering care of his late-won partner. To his general weak health was added in 1401 the calamity of blindness, which put a term to his literary labours. In the autumn of 1408 he died, and was buried in the church of St. Mary Overies (*i.e.*, over the river). This was a priory church, in connexion with which Gower, as *clerk*, not as priest, had at one time held the living of Great Braxted in Essex. His last years had been spent within the cloister, to the rebuilding of which he had been one of the chief contributors. In contrast with the canons regular, in whose society he loved to dwell, he speaks of himself as a 'borel clerk.' The term 'borel' is commonly used in a contemptuous sense, but, in this passage of the *Confessio Amantis*, it must refer to his character as layman. That he esteemed highly his attainments in learning is evident from the tomb he designed for himself. The collar of SS.

and the small swan were not forgotten, but more notable than either are the three volumes on which his head lay pillowed, and which represented the French *Speculum Hominis* (or *Meditantis*), the Latin *Vox Clamantis*, and the English *Confessio Amantis*. His long auburn hair, falling in a curl on his shoulder, was wreathed with a chaplet of roses, 'in token,' says Berthelette, 'that he in his life-days flourished freshly in literature and science.'

In the newly-recovered *Mirour de l'Omme*, the French title of what used to be known as the *Speculum Meditantis*, Gower makes certain confessions. Mr. G. C. Macaulay, who has laid the world of letters under obligations by his edition of the *Mirour*, appears not to find in these confessions the significance which, it seems to us, they ought to bear. 'Once,' says Gower, 'I abandoned myself to wantonness and vain joy. I made foolish love-poems, and danced as I sang them. But now I will take heed, and change all that.' Now it happens that there are some

*Cinquante  
Balades.*

fifty ballads (whence the collection is entitled the *Cinquante Balades*) by Gower's hand, and the question arises, when were they written? Long

ago Warton, guided by style and subject, had assigned them to the period of youth; and now that we know, what could hardly have been conjectured, that at some time before the composition of the long French poem he had been addicted to literary and other folly, it is natural to regard his avowal as confirmation of Warton's guess. On due consideration, however, of Gower's sobriety, it does not seem probable that he ever went far astray, and the extant *Balades* are certainly not marked by any excess of wantonness. Some are written for persons anticipating marriage, others for lovers in various situations, and a few for ladies. They constitute, in fact, a sort of general hymnary of the tender passion. It may be freely admitted that

they are not poems such as most men would indite in their youth, but then Gower was not a commonplace mortal, and valued himself on his poetic gift. The dedication to Henry IV. and the statement that he will make a ballade, or ballades, to please the Court, seems to indicate little more than this: That Henry, knowing of the existence of the poems, induced Gower to publish them. Gower had passed his French phase, had passed his Latin phase, and was engaged in active competition with Chaucer for the honours of English poesy. It involves, therefore, somewhat of an anachronism to imagine that in this matter he would, as it were, go back upon himself, especially if he had a store of French verse in safe custody. Considering his turn for economy and the importance he attached to literature, it is not likely that those 'fols ditz d'amours' were ever destroyed.

As used of the *Mirour* and *Balades*, the term 'French' is, and can be, employed only in the widest sense. Gower writes in the Anglo-Norman dialect, which is, in many respects, unlike Continental French and has a history of its own. As it influenced English, so English influenced it, notably in the prosody, which differs from—say—Froissart's rhythm by its sharply defined accents. The laxity also which Gower exhibits with regard to gender, his sacrifice of grammar to rhyme, may be reasonably attributed to the chaotic condition of English reflecting itself in the alternate tongue. His position thus far closely resembles that of a dialect-poet in our own day. Dialect-verse, however, usually bears the mark of illiteracy and common surroundings. This is not the case with Gower's *Balades*, which breathe an air of courtliness and social refinement, and are decked with ornaments of learning. Anglo-Norman, whatever its philological status may be, was the language of the puissant Plantagenets and a splendid aristocracy.



Looked at in this light, Gower's position is unique. He was the chief and last true singer of a day that was swiftly drawing to a close—the day of Anglo-Norman supremacy. It is natural, and perhaps pardonable, to feel some prejudice against Gower. He figured as one born to set the world to rights, and the quantity of his verse is more remarkable than its quality. Moreover, these pretensions lose nothing of their distastefulness in contrast with the genial temper and less monotonous art of his rival. No prejudice, however, can blind us to the fact that these ballades are very charming things. The exquisite courtesy of phrase, the limpid clearness, the ingenious variations of themes which are, as he says, for the most part 'universal,' the graceful fancy seizing on images that naturally occur to a courtier and as naturally appeal to a gentle lady, the not too frequent classical allusions—these traits remind us of Petrarch, whose masters, the troubadours, must have exercised great influence, direct or indirect, on his contemporary. The fund of true feeling, the human need, the sincerity of confession which inspire Petrarch's unaffected, but melodious utterance, unhappily find no echo in Gower's studied and rhetorical composition. Such lines as

'Mon coer, mon corps, mes sens et ma resoun,'

and

'Si plein d'onour, si plein de courtoisie,'

if they fit their place, indicate a state of soul by no means so perturbed as the water of a fountain, that leaps and bubbles and runs adown the meadow, or the changeful mouth of March. But then Gower's muse is impersonal. Explicitly, he sings for others.

When it became known that the *Speculum Meditantis* (or *Mirour de l'Omme*) had been recovered and was on the

point of being edited, there was much curiosity as to its nature and contents. A brilliant French critic *Mirour de l'Homme.* hazarded the guess that it would prove to be a long-winded tirade against the depravities of the different orders of society, or, in other words, a work of the stamp known to his countrymen of the Middle Ages as a Bible! The surmise turned out to be correct, so far as it went, but it did not go far enough. The *Mirour*, carried to the insufferable length of thirty thousand lines, is divisible into three main compartments, in the first of which vices and virtues are discussed. The second is a review of all sorts and conditions of men. In the third the corruptions that exist in the world are traced to man's sin, and we are taught how sinful man, leaving his wickedness, ought to reform and win pardon by the aid of our Lord Jesus Christ and His sweet mother, the glorious Virgin. The poem concludes with a Life of the Virgin, who, in pre-Reformation days, was more vividly present to the imagination of Christians than Christ himself.

The first part of the poem is wholly allegorical, and, in enumerating particular sorts of sin, depicts them as offspring of more general types. This section traverses the same ground as *Paradise Lost*, which, in like manner, tricks into allegory the sentence of Holy Writ—'Sin came into the world, and death by sin.' Being an epic, however, and not a treatise on morals, Milton's poem stops well short of the extravagant developments of the *Mirour de l'Homme*. Still, the *Mirour* is not to be confounded with works like the *Manuel des Pechiez*, written for practical use, as a preparation for confession. We have seen how Gower, deploring the misapplication of his talents, promises to 'change all that.' Here we have the fulfilment. The subject-matter is no longer love, but religion. Gower, however, has not for that reason—wittingly and willingly—

sunk the poet in the preacher. In point of fact, the *Mirour* has everywhere a strong literary flavour. 'Every now and then,' says Mr. Macaulay, 'by some touch of description the author betrays himself as the graceful poet of the *Balades*, his better part being crushed under mountains of morality and piles of deadly learning, but surviving nevertheless. For example, the priest who neglects his early morning service is reminded of the example of the lark, who rising very early mounts circling upward and pours forth a service of praise to God from her little throat.'

A striking feature in Gower's character is his unprogressiveness. The classification of vices in the *Confessio Amantis* is a resumption of that already paraded in the *Speculum Meditantis*. The classification of men in the *Speculum Meditantis* is reproduced in the *Vox Clamantis*. Stories are reproduced. Epigrams are reproduced. The lines, for instance,

'L'omme yvere en soy trop se deçoit,  
Qu'il quide a boire qui luy boit,'

reappear as

'He drinkth the wine, but at the last  
The wine drinkth him, and binds him fast.'

It was Gower's fate to live through a political and economic crisis of the gravest sort. During Contemporary England. the early years of the reign of the boy-king, Richard II., there were present in the realm of England almost all the causes of popular discontent. The French and Spanish enemy preyed on the maritime towns. Northwards, the Scots were menacing. The expedition of John of Gaunt to Brittany was a failure. The needs of war entailed heavy taxation, and the insolence of those who farmed the revenue waxed apace. Traffic was

hampered by all manner of restrictions, and a large proportion of the people still groaned under the yoke of serfdom. The general misery provoked in 1381 a dangerous insurrection, of which Wat Tyler, John Ball, an excommunicated priest, and Jack Straw, the priest of the Essex men, were the captains. A huge mob of a hundred thousand men assembled on Blackheath and poured into the city, where they fired the palace of John of Gaunt at the Savoy and slew the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Tower. The insurrectionary spirit was by no means limited to the eastern shires, but the *foci* of the peasant revolt were Kent and Essex—counties in which part of Gower's property lay. Perhaps he had himself seen the heads of slaughtered tax-gatherers carried on poles. It is certain that he witnessed, here and there, much hideous ravage, if indeed his own cherished manors did not share the attentions of the rioters. For the moment the institutions of the country seemed thrown into the melting-pot; and thenceforth, if Tyler and his followers could have their way, the principles of the social contract were to be liberty, equality, fraternity. The frankness and generosity of the young king saved the old *régime*, but not before all interested in the existing order, from the Duke of Lancaster downwards, had received a rude shock. The thrill of horror produced by this sudden earthquake, this monstrous upheaval, is stereotyped in Gower's *Vox Clamantis*. How he shuddered, how he pondered in the fourteenth century, we can read to-day.

The title, transparently St. John the Baptist's description of himself, is apposite rather to the later than  
*Vox* to the first of the seven books of which the  
*Clamantis.* poem is composed, but, applied to the composition as a whole, is excellently chosen. The first book serves as an introduction, depicting the wilderness; in the second, the new Baptist inaugurates his cry or mess-

age to the men of his generation. Very adroit and effective is the proem, which, under the similitude of a lovely summer-day, images the false security of the nation. The day closes, and during the night the poet is seized with misgivings, presentiments. At last, when the Morning Star signals the approach of day, he has a terrible dream. Going into the fields to gather flowers, he meets with countless monsters. The common people lose their wits, are transformed into wild beasts. Asses refuse their burdens and claim to be treated like horses. Oxen will no longer plough, but are fierce as dragons. Amidst a herd of unclean swine is an elephantine boar, a native of Kent, who ranges forth to combat, *i.e.*, Wat Tyler. At a later stage of the dream he appears as a jay who has learnt to talk—‘wat’ signified jay in those days—and on the strength of this accomplishment claims to head an army of flies, and wasps, and poisonous devouring frogs. He is reinforced by the hateful descendants of Cain and Circe’s imbruted captives—verily, a rabble rout. In the seventeenth century Thomas Fuller, who had fallen on like evil days, was naturally attracted to this poem, of which in his *Church History* he makes sympathetic mention :

‘As the Philistines came in three companies to destroy all the swords and smiths in Israel, so this rabble of rebels, making itself tripartite, endeavoured the rooting out of all penknives, and all appearance of learning. One in Kent, under the afore-said Wat and John (*Straw*); the second in Suffolk; the third under John Littstarre, a dyer, in Norfolk. The former is described in the Latin verses of John Gower, prince of poets in his time, of whom we will bestow the following translation :

“Watte vocat, cui Thomme venit, neque Symme retardat,  
 Recteque Gibbe simul Hicke venire jubent :  
 Colle furit, quem Gelfe juvat, nocumenta parantes,  
 Cum quibus ad damnum Wille coire vovet.

Grigge rapit dum Dawe strepit, comes est quibus Hobbe,  
 Lorkin et in medio non minor esse putat,  
 Haddie ferit, quos Judde terit, dum Tebbe minatur,  
 Jacke domosque viros vellit et ense necat."

"“Tom comes thereat when called by Wat, and Simon as forward we find;  
 Bet calls as quick to Gibb, and to Hykk, that neither would tarry behind.  
 Jeff, a good whelp of that litter, doth help mad Coll more mischief to do,  
 And Will he doth vow, the time is come now, he'll join with their company too.  
 Davie complains, while Grigg gets the gains, and Hobb with them doth partake,  
 Lorkin aloud, in the midst of the crowd, conceiveth as deep as his stake.  
 Hadd doth spoil, whom Judd doth foil, and Tebb lends a helping hand,  
 But Jack, the mad patch, men and houses doth snatch, and kills all at his command.”

‘Oh, the methodical description of a confusion! How doth Wat lead the front, and Jack bring up the rear!’

Gower is more methodical than Fuller, for, in point of fact, it is Ball, not Straw, that brings up the rear, and the translation says not a word about proud Hogg, Nature's gentleman. The poet now proceeds to an idealized version of the events of Corpus Christi day so much resembling the taking of the Bastille. Thence he lapses back into pure vision, drifting in a dream-world to a strange island that is none other than Britain. From an old man he learns something of the mixed races inhabiting the country, and is assured that, though now wild as wolves, no people would be worthier, were they more in accord. The dreamer is profoundly miserable, but a voice from Heaven

points out the vanity of sorrow, and charges him to write in a book the things he has heard and seen.

From a literary standpoint this first book is far more significant than any of its successors, which are a mixture of theology and politics. The second book insists on man's responsibility as co-worker with God in the economy of the world. Whether we fare well or ill, it is not Fortune's doing, but our rough-hewing and God that shapes our ends. Incidentally Gower alludes to the use and abuse of graven images, commending them as memorials, but denouncing them when employed for the purpose of extortion. The third book begins with the expression of a hope that the writer may be useful and impartial as a minister of God in the land; and that his verse may answer to the character of the task undertaken. Gower divides people into three main categories—clerk, soldier, and ploughman. In his *Epis Clavigera* (Letter XV.) Ruskin adopts the same distinctions. Speaking of Sir John Hawkwood, he says: 'Before I can explain to you anything either about him or his friend, I must develop the statement made above (XI. 6), of the complex modes of injustice respecting the means of maintenance, which have hitherto held in all ages among the three great classes of soldiers, clergy, and peasants. I mean, by "peasants" the producers of food, out of land or water; by "clergy" men who live by teaching or exhibition of behaviour; and by "soldiers" those who live by fighting, either by robbing wise peasants or getting themselves paid by foolish ones. Into these three classes the world's multitudes are essentially hitherto divided.' Gower's criticisms of the clergy are extremely caustic and outspoken, reminding us, indeed, of the hirelings in *Lycidas*,

'Such as, for their bellies' sake,  
Creep, and intrude, and climb into the fold!'



The prelates are inconceivably worldly. They regard riches above wisdom. Nay, with them, riches and wisdom are convertible terms. There is no such thing as a poor wise man. The simony of the bishops is paralleled by the unspiritual behaviour of the lower orders of the priesthood. Parsons either quit their parishes for a post at Court or a bench at the divinity school, that they may better serve their lusts; or, residing in their parishes, hunt fox and hare, while the cry of hounds is their church-bell. Continuing his review, Gower assails monks, friars, and nuns, and then turns to the soldier. He has a passable idea of what constitutes a knight, and maintains that woman, according as she is good or bad, is the soldier's salvation or undoing. For the serf Gower has no kind reflexions. He is a sensual, greedy fellow, who would ride his master if he could. The citizens are fraudulent hypocrites; the lawyers subtle thieves, and too many. The poet at last arrives at the throne and lectures the young Josiah, the 'good young king,' that sits thereon. He sets before him the example of his father, the Black Prince, and perchance is not unmindful of the scandals that deformed the last years of his renowned grandfather. Anyhow, he bids him shun the besetments of the flesh:

‘Rex es, regina satis est, tibi sufficit una.’

Wretched versifying, but excellent preachment! Lest, however, suasion be not enough, the terrors of the law are imported in the fate of Nebuchadnezzar, rather to daunt the king's ministers than himself. Then Gower returns to an old text—that we can be happy if we choose. Man is a microcosm; the world is what we make it. This doctrine appears strange in days that witnessed the martyrdom of Archbishop Sudbury; but Gower, on the whole, speaks truth. For most people the world is a reflexion of them-

selves. So much fault-finding might seem to argue a litigious and unpatriotic spirit. The poet, therefore, in the last place clears himself of this accusation. He strikes only at the guilty and loves his motherland above every other country. Moreover, his voice is not his own. It is the voice of the people; and the voice of the people, how often it is the voice of God! Singular termination of a poem, whose leading motive is the rise and fall of demagoguery!

Gower believed in a constitutional aristocracy—not unlike that which obtains in England, despite  
*The Tripartite Chronicle.* all changes, to-day. Richard's reign was a disappointment to the poet. Acting under French inspiration, that monarch sought to make himself independent, despotic; and unbridled ambition conducted him, as it conducted Charles I., to ruin. On the accession of Henry IV., Gower decided on an appendix to his *Vox Clamantis*, for which he selected the difficult form of leonine Latin verse. He called it *The Tripartite Chronicle*, on the ground that the first part describes human work; the second, hellish work; and the third, work in Christ. The whole is a sort of political allegory—at any rate, the chief actors are dubbed Boar, Horse, Swan, etc.—and invites attention as the reverse of the preceding meditation. The villain of the play is no longer Wat the Jay, but Richard, the rising hope of other days. There is, of course, no inward contradiction between the poems. Gower stands where he did—the essence of impartiality and old-fashioned morals. His earnest satire can lash the crimes of kings no less than the outrages of mad, presumptuous boors.

The origin of the *Confessio Amantis* (or *Confession of a Lover*) is declared by Gower to have been  
*Confessio Amantis.* as follows. Rowing in a boat on the Thames he chanced to meet his liege lord, King Richard. The king invited him to enter the royal barge.

Monarch and poet chatted pleasantly, and the former suggested a new book. This command Gower, though troubled with infirm health, was willing to obey, but he was not minded to renounce the philosopher's part utterly and wholly.

'I wouldë go the middle way  
And write a book between the twey,  
Somewhat of lust (*pleasure*), somewhat of lore.'

He would write also in English.

'And that for fewë men indite  
In our English, I thinkë make  
A book for King Richardës sake.'

From the way this is expressed it may be inferred that the king himself gave him the hint to employ the English tongue. In other words, the phrase 'in our English' is to be understood twice over.

The date of the composition cannot be determined with certainty. It may have been begun as early as 1386, or even 1383, but Mr. Macaulay has shown that the manuscripts of the first recension bear the date 1390, doubtless the year of its completion. These early poets, however, were seldom content with the original draught, nor was Gower an exception. In 1392-3 he produced a new version, and he now says he thinks to make

'A bookë for Englundës sake,  
The year sixteenth of King Richard.'

A notable variation; but still more significant are the lines:

'This book, upon amendement  
• • • • •  
I send unto mine ownë lord,  
Which of Lancaster is Henry named.'

The 'wisdom' or 'lore' of which Gower thinks so much is supposed to be expended in the prologue, and amounts to a reproduction of the moral censures lavished on contemporaries in his preceding works. For us the serious interest of the poem centres almost entirely in the attitude of the writer towards reform. This attitude is one of irreconcilable antagonism. The ills of Church and State are not to be remedied by a new-fangled heresy.

'Now were it good that thou forthy,  
Which through baptism properly  
Art unto Christës faith professed,  
Beware that thou be not oppressed  
With Antichristës lollardry.

. . . . .

But if thou wilt live out of fear,  
Such newë lore I rede (*advise*) eschew,  
And hold forthright the way and sue,  
As their ancèstors did ere this,  
So shalt thou not believe amiss.'

Another matter which naturally engages attention is the

Gower and Chaucer.	literary relations between Gower and Chaucer, as revealed in the earlier and later editions. In the version dedicated to King Richard.
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Venus has a message for Chaucer:

'And greet well Chaucer, when ye meet,  
As my disciple and poete.

. . . . .

Thou shalt him tellë this message,  
That he, upon his later age,  
To set an end of all his work,  
As he which is mine ownë clerk,  
Do make his Testament of Love.'

In the Tancastrian version this passage is excised, but we find instead an allusion to the *Canterbury Tales*:

‘But for my wittës be too small  
To tellen every man his tale.’

This has every appearance of being ironical, and signs are not wanting that the friendship, which at one time existed between the two poets, had been subjected to a severe strain by literary rivalry. It is a notable circumstance that the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales*, so to speak, overlap. Usually, but not perhaps invariably, this means that Chaucer repeated Gower’s stories, thus challenging comparison. One of the older writer’s indiscretions was to include in his long catalogue the unsavoury loves of Canace and Machaire, which he even goes so far as to defend. In the *Canterbury Tales* the Man of Law praises Chaucer, inasmuch as he has steered clear of this offensive topic:

‘But certainly no word ne writeth he  
Of thilkẽ wick(ed) ensample of Canace,  
That loved her owen brother sinfully:  
Of all such cursed stories I say Fie!’

Censure of this sort does not indicate perfect cordiality.

The word ‘ensample’ suggests the fundamental difference between Chaucer’s style of narration and that of Gower. All Gower’s stories are by way of illustration; they are intended to serve as warnings against one or other of the Seven Deadly Sins, and grouped accordingly. To adopt his own words, they are

‘Wisdom to the wise,  
And play to them that list to play,’

but the concession is made unwillingly. On the other hand, the final cause of the *Canterbury Tales* is amusement, as the Host more than once protests:

‘Sir Monk, no more of this, so God you bless;  
Your tale annoyeth all this company;  
Such talking is not worth a butterfly,  
For thereinnẽ is none disport nor game.’

Of the *Canterbury Tales* also it may be said that they are illustrations, but of what? Not of virtue or vice, not of abstract quality, but of concrete personality. This dramatic aim is wholly outside the scope of Gower's poem, for the reason that his personages are nebulous nonentities—Venus, and Genius, and the Lover. How vastly different from the breathing types of the Tabard! Gower was less happy, too, than Chaucer in the invention of a general scheme. The *Confessio Amantis* opens with the adventure of a lover out of conceit with a world in which love is dethroned. He strays on a May day into the woods, and, throwing himself on the ground, appeals to Cupid and Venus. The King and Queen of Love appear, but are in no compassionate mood. The Lover supplicates Venus to listen to his tale of woe, and she refers him to Genius, her chaplain, who shall act as confessor. The Priest of Love, a highly moral person, does not think his office fulfilled by propounding mere amatory questions. He interrogates the penitent regarding vice, and exhibits its different forms by means of stories, much as we find in the *Manuel des Pechiez*.

Thus the *Confessio Amantis*, though a huge affair, cannot be truthfully accounted an *indigesta moles*. On the contrary, the poet has a clear and definite purpose, to which his vast material is everywhere subordinated—the instruction of people in the rudiments of morality; and the accumulation of stories is merely a form of tuition. Gower—in the *Confessio Amantis*, at any rate—is no more than a homilist. The flights and frenzies of prophesying do not disturb the even tenor of his meditation. Always he is master of himself.

If we look away from his portentous generalities, and confine our attention to the tales, it must be conceded that Gower is a skilled narrator. While Chaucer treats a story as a vehicle for humour, for criticism, for the attainment of

a practical design, Gower's methodical nature will not permit of this confusion. He has a tale to narrate, and does his duty by it, the result being a neat relation in neat and elegant verse. This is not to place Gower on a higher altitude than Chaucer, whose feast of reason is incomparably more rich than Gower's modest entertainment, but the truth remains that he who craves a tale, a repository of tales, simple, straightforward, unadulterated and unadorned, had better turn to Gower rather than to Chaucer. Gower, of course, is not regardless of the moral, but this very circumstance causes him to march, without deviating, to the climax. Chaucer, on the other hand, is apt to stave off the catastrophe, lest, by a premature close, opportunities for feeling and reflexion should be left unimproved.

Judging from the initial rubric Gower's last work was his *Traitié*, which may have been written on the eve of his second marriage (i.e., in 1397), and is addressed to married people. The rubric alludes to his English writings, devoted to particular cases, and promises in the *Traitié* a more general handling of the theme. The poem, which is in every sense an anti-climax, resembles in its broad features, as well as in metre, the *Cinquante Balades*, but, on the whole, has less poetical effect. The fortunes of Nectabanus, Hercules and Deianira, Jason, Clytemnestra, Lucretia, Paulina, Alboin and Rosamond, Tereus, Valentinian, which have already done duty in the *Confessio Amantis*, pointing morals and adorning tales, are again adduced, and may now be classed as stock instances. As may be inferred from the character of its writer and the circumstances of its composition, this garland of ballades, eighteen in number, breathes the purest and strictest morality, and, exhibiting the results of wanton indulgence, cautions the



'university of the world' against the snares and traps of Cupid. The motto of the book might be taken from Ballade XVII., which has for refrain :

'A un est une assetz en marriage.'

The same ballade cites Gawayne, the romantic hero of the century, as a typical offender—'courteous in love, but too inconstant.' The series is pleasant to read, and the allusion to Cupid's Fair is striking enough to have deserved further development, but neither fancy nor imagination plays a conspicuous part in the well-ordered set. In the last ballade Gower excuses his faulty French on the ground of his being English: but it was a great achievement, almost unparalleled, to have versified so much and so fluently in three languages, even if it involved *crambe repetita*, abuse of opportunity.

## CHAPTER VI.

### CHAUCER'S EARLY LIFE AND WRITINGS.

MORE perhaps than any other poet, Chaucer is the symbol of his age. Many writers have, in appearance or reality, been more original. Wordsworth, for instance, fought the fashion of his time, and insisted on his own view of life, on his own theory of literary art and expression. Strenuousness of that order was foreign to Chaucer. Perhaps the last epithet a sane critic would apply to Chaucer is 'strenuous.' 'Facile' is as apt a word as any to describe that exuberance of talent which, like ivy or eglantine, clings to the fabric it adorns, the fabric of precedent. Chaucer was not typically English. He was not without certain qualities—rather moral than mental—which Englishmen regard as distinctive of their nationality. He was frank, and tolerant, and manly. He was worldly-wise. As for his piety, it was not of the dominant English, the severely Puritanic, type. His intellectual vision, too, was not insular, but cosmopolitan. He went to school in French poetry. Later, another literature gained ascendancy over his mind. But for home produce, the minstrel's rule of thumb, he has only irony and scorn. If he wrote English, that is clear proof that the churl's tongue, in however indeterminate a form, had at last ousted its rival from the field of general discourse.

Was Chaucer an Englishman? The question is not so

idle as may appear. No doubt, he was a loyal liege of the Plantagenets. No doubt, persons of his name, and probably of his blood, had been settled for generations in London and the Eastern shires. The name itself, however, is French. At one time it was supposed to represent *chaussier* (i.e., a shoemaker), but Mr. Edward Scott has shown<sup>1</sup> from documents belonging to Westminster Abbey that the name stands for *chaufecire* (i.e., a 'chafe-wax,' as Cotgrave has it). On the whole, perhaps, it is to be associated rather with official wax and Chancery than with cobbler's wax, though the latter was, so to speak, consecrated in Hans Sachs. Centuries might have elapsed since the term had any bearing on the status and occupation of the Chaucers—at least, of the poet's branch; and Chaucer, looking round on his plentiful namesakes, may have shared the feelings of a great French artist when he visited his ancestral Burgundy, and remarked with pleasurable surprise that the workers in the fields greeted each other with the words 'He! Corot!' The tendency of the name is to suggest that Chaucer, in company with Dante and Shakespeare, was not of high lineage, and that, in any case, his lineage was foreign. If reasonable deductions be accepted concerning his parentage and pedigree, his grandfather was one Robert le Chaucer, collector of wine-dues in the Port of London, and owner of a small property at Ipswich. On the death of Robert, his widow married Richard le Chaucer, who, although he left a house and tavern to the Church of St. Mary Aldermary, proved on the whole a good stepfather to her son John. It seems not improbable that this lady had been a Stace—a circumstance which would account for the irregular and highly reprehensible procedure of Thomas Stace, of

<sup>1</sup> See *Athenæum*, February 4th, 1899.

Ipswich, in relation to her orphan boy. When John was twelve or fourteen years old, his uncle, as we may suppose him, carried him off bodily with the fell purpose of joining him in wedlock with Joan Westhale, and thus consolidating their estates. The indignation of Richard le Chaucer frustrated this amiable design, and in 1328, four years after the abortive attempt, John was still a bachelor.

Like his stepfather, John Chaucer was a vintner, but he varied this employment by attendance on King Edward III. when, in 1338, he crossed the sea, and by acting as deputy to the King's Butler in the Port of Southampton. These official appointments, held alike by Robert, and John, and Geoffrey, and thus in a sense hereditary, point to the conclusion that, in the cleavage between court and country, between French and English, the Chaucers, conformably to their origin, assisted to maintain the foreign supremacy. If Pauli be right, Edward III. found it a hard matter on a public occasion to utter three consecutive words in the speech of the people. Hence, in order to communicate with him, it was necessary to use the kind of dialect he understood. This consideration makes it virtually certain that John Chaucer, and Robert before him, were attached to the French interest. The long antagonism between the races was, however, in England rapidly dying out.

John Chaucer married, perhaps late in life, Agnes, niece of Hugo de Compton. His wife in 1349, in 1367, the year after his decease, she espoused another vintner, Bartholomew atte Chapel. While there is no positive certainty, the chances are that Agnes was the mother of the poet. Returning to John Chaucer, the evidence connecting him with the author of the *Canterbury Tales* is the fact that in 1382 John's son Geoffrey released to Henry Herbury his father's house in Thames Street. Now it is quite possible

that there were two contemporary Geoffrey Chaucers. The discoveries one makes of this sort are sometimes truly amazing. Until, however, proof to the contrary is forthcoming, it will seem to most people more likely than not that Geoffrey Chaucer, the son of the vintner, and Geoffrey Chaucer the poet were one and the same.

The vintner's calling does not at first promise any high degree of respectability. Of necessity it was associated with taverns, and the presiding genius of the tavern, the ideal vintner of all times and places, has been portrayed for us by Chaucer himself in the immortal Bailey, a good hearty fellow, but something indelicate. It may be, however, that, in estimating the social importance of the family, this analogy would lead us seriously astray. The economic requirements of a warlike monarch, the demands for subsidies not tamely or invariably granted, made the merchants of London a power in the land. One instance is recorded in which a merchant prince, and he a vintner, entertained the four kings of England, Scotland, France, and Cyprus. This was in the year following Poitiers, when, says Stow, Henry Picard kept his hall against all comers willing to play at dice and hazard, and the Lady Margaret, his wife, kept her chamber to the same intent. John Chaucer may never have attained such a climax of prosperity as this, but the sale of wine has ever been lucrative, and social purists may well be lenient to a profession, graced by the smiles of royalty, out of whose bosom have proceeded those golden lamps of humanity, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Ruskin.

It is regrettable that the date of Chaucer's birth cannot be fixed. There is a consensus among scholars to adopt the year 1340, chiefly on the ground that in 1386, when he was witness in the Scrope and Grosvenor controversy,

Chaucer stated himself to be forty years *and upwards*—an indistinct and indefinite vista which cynics have explained, after their manner, by the imputation of vanity. The traditional date was for long 1328, and this accorded with a not unfounded belief that, at the time of his death in the year 1400, Chaucer was an old man. Fifteen or twenty years before, in the *House of Fame*, he testified of himself, with the candour of Falstaff, ‘I am old.’ Gower, also, scruples not to remind him of his ‘days old’ as of an incontestable truth charged with its own moral. One may ask, however, whether these expressions were intended absolutely or relatively. At forty a man may deem himself too old to embark on a new pursuit, and even, if newspaper correspondence be a gauge, to obtain a fresh situation. At forty a man may be properly, if rashly, admonished by a serious friend to abate something of juvenile frivolity. At sixty, though many would choose to live longer, a man cannot be considered to die young. Chaucer was not born in 1328, for then, as we have seen, his father was still unmarried. The late Professor Morley, however, having regard to Chaucer’s suspicious apology and the odd jumble of evidence in the Scrope and Grosvenor case (several of the deponents had been, as he represents, in a twofold sense babes in arms), opined that the year 1332 might be somewhere near the mark. On the whole, the balance of probability is in favour of a later date (*i.e.*, 1340), but we must needs confess and deplore the absence of criteria to determine the poet’s age at different stages of his career.

As his father was, apparently, a vintner in Thames Street, it has been not unnaturally conjectured that Geoffrey Chaucer was born and bred in the great city where he was destined to pass so large a portion of his mature life.

Youthful  
Associations.

Admirable pictures have been drawn of the impressions likely to have been made on his childish imagination by the sights and sounds of the busy mart. Many-storied, gabled houses lined the left bank of the river (bluer than to-day, though not so blue as shown in the miniatures), and formed on the ground floor arcades where vessels from many lands discharged their cargoes, and rich merchandise was kept in store. It is worth mention that the gild of German merchants had its quarters for centuries in Thames Street, just as Italian bankers had theirs in Lombard Street. On the right bank of the stream was Southwark, a village famous for its inns. There was the 'Tabard' renowned in the *Canterbury Tales*, and there the beautiful church of St. Mary Overies, where Gower was to lie in his last long sleep. Like Paris, London, if fair, was also foul. Pigs ran wild in the streets, and constituted so inveterate a nuisance that, as we learn from the *Liber Albus*, four men were elected and sworn to take and kill swine straying within the city walls. Chaucer as a boy may have feasted his eyes on these animated scenes, even if a description of pig-sticking in the metre and manner of *Sir Thopas* be not found in any of his writings now extant. True, in the *Testament of Love* are found words which used to be cited in proof of Chaucer's attachment to his native Cokaigne - the City of London to him 'so sweet and dear,' where he had forthgown, and to which he had more kindly love than to any other place. The *Testament of Love*, however, is no longer acknowledged as genuine. In the *Reeve's Tale*, the authenticity of which is likely to remain unchallenged, Clerk John is discovered saying:

'I shall be held a daft, a cockeney'—

a not too patriotic allusion, if Chaucer was in fact a Londoner. That cockney signified Londoner at this period



is, however, only an inference from later Elizabethan usage. A distinguished Norfolk antiquary has brought together sundry pieces of evidence, some from local records, others from Chaucer's work, which may well excuse the suspicion that the poet, if he was not born, may have spent some portion of his childhood and youth, in the neighbourhood of Lynn. Chaucer's incidental allusions suggest an extensive and peculiar knowledge of the county which he could hardly have acquired at any period of his life with which we are familiar.

During what may be termed the 'dark age' of his career, it is distinctly probable that Chaucer studied at one or both of the English universities, and, for that matter, at the University of Paris as well.<sup>1</sup> Leland's round assertion to that effect may rest, not on reckless invention, but on tradition, and is countenanced by the poet's own writings. The *Court of Love* having been pronounced spurious, it follows that Chaucer cannot be identified with 'Philogenet, of Cambridge clerk,' but the *Reeve's Tale*, recounting the wild-goose escapade of a brace of undergraduates, has an air of intimacy, as well as dashes of local colour, unattainable perhaps at second hand. The chief argument, however, in favour of Chaucer's residence at some university is his love of books, his Latin, his general learning. Although his 'literature' was not in every particular quite what he pretends—he was not even on bowing terms with Homer—there is ample testimony that he could read Ovid and understand him very passably well. And the same remark applies to other classics, whose authority he characteristically invokes.

Leland and Speght are liberal enough to furnish ad-

<sup>1</sup> He might have been sent at a very early age, in accordance with the old-world custom, before he became a page.

ditional details. The circumstances of the case, so far as we are acquainted with them, appear to indicate that the poet was educated for one of the learned professions. Chaucer's early biographers tell us which: he was intended to be a lawyer. It is possible that somebody imposed on Speght regarding the record of the fine supposed to have been seen by Master Buckley. The beating of the friar in Fleet Street may be a fable, and Chaucer may never have been a member of the Inner Temple. But there can be no certainty on the point, as the Temple records were destroyed by Wat Tyler and his followers in 1381; and the tradition that Chaucer, like Tasso (and how many besides?), preferred literature to law, is not improbably correct.

Poetry is not easily vendible, but it has often proved the passport to patronage. Chaucer's talent, or his father's interest, or both, procured him a post at Court, which was the precursor of many more lucrative appointments. In the first authentic mention of the poet (April, 1357) he is attached to the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, and wife of Lionel, third son of Edward III. Fragments of her accounts have been handed down, and among other items of expenditure are a paltok (or short cloak), a pair of red and black breeches, and shoes for Geoffrey Chaucer. Two years later he shared in the ill-fated expedition to France, was taken prisoner by the enemy, and the king paid sixteen pounds—equivalent to two hundred and forty of our present money—for his ransom. When next we hear of him in the year 1367—he is the king's 'beloved valet' and in receipt of a pension of twenty marks. It is noticeable that this title—*valettus cameræ regis*—is identical with that which Molière was to bear in the days of Louis Quatorze.

The precise meaning of 'valet' in this connexion has

been much discussed. It was used convertibly with 'yeoman,' but it appears tolerably certain that the term signified gentleman-in-waiting.

The Duties of  
a Valet.

The next step in the ladder, to which Chaucer mounted the very next year, was that of esquire. As valet he would be supposed to serve in chamber, make beds, hold and carry torches, and so on, at the bidding of king or chamberlain. As esquire, his duties were more interesting. These members of the household, says an old manuscript, were wont, winter and summer, in the afternoons and evenings, to proceed to their lord's chambers in the Court, there to keep honest company after their cunning, talking of chronicles of kings, or piping, or harping, or singing, in order to help occupy the Court and entertain strangers, till the time came for their departure. We are thus led to perceive, not only how Chaucer adopted, in so far as material circumstances conduced to that end, the vocation of poet, but also into what style of poetry he would naturally be drawn. The accord, however, between Chaucer's secular calling and the character of his poetry is not the sole point that deserves attention. Here, as elsewhere, he is the symbol of his age. M. Taine has, with rare ability and at considerable length, compared and illustrated fourteenth-century art and letters:

'Similarly, in the fourteenth century, second age of the feudal world, we see on the one side lace-work of stone and the slender bloom of airy forms, on the other refined verses and amusing stories taking the place of the grand old architecture and the old simple epic. It is no longer the superabundance of true feeling that produces them, but the need of excitement. Think of Chaucer, his subjects and his manner of choosing them. He seeks them everywhere, in Italy, in France, in the popular legends, in the ancient classics. His readers have need of variety, and his duty is to furnish them with "beautiful

sayings": that is the poet's duty at this period. The lords at table have ended dining, the minstrels arrive to sing, the gleam of the torches falls on the velvet and the ermine, on the quaint shapes, the motley, the wrought embroideries of the long robes. At this moment comes the poet, and presents his manuscript richly illuminated, bound in crimson violet, adorned with clasps, with silver bosses, with golden roses. They ask him whereof he treats, and he answers, "Of love."

In the household accounts of the Countess of Ulster mention occurs of a certain Philippa Pan', for Marriage. whom apparel was provided in the same way as for Geoffrey Chaucer. Pan' has been expanded into Panetaria (Mistress of the Pantry). In any case, it is not likely to have been a surname. In 1366 a pension of ten marks was granted Philippa Chaucer, one of the ladies of Queen Philippa. In May, 1381, Philippa Chaucer's pension was paid to 'Geoffrey Chaucer, her husband.' It seems in every way probable that the whilom Philippa Pan' was the Philippa Chaucer of 1366, just as it is passably certain that the Philippa Chaucer of 1366 was the Philippa Chaucer of 1381. Thomas Gascoigne, who flourished about the middle of the fifteenth century—relatively not long after—testifies that Geoffrey Chaucer had a son Thomas, but regarding this and like statements much scepticism has prevailed. A recent discovery by Mr. Edward Scott, of the British Museum, seemed to have placed the accuracy of Gascoigne and the relationship of Thomas Chaucer—his existence has never been denied—beyond the reach of doubt. The effect of this discovery was to restore, partially at least, the credit of old beliefs; but a still more recent discovery by Mr. R. E. G. Kirk has rather weakened our conclusions. An account of the receiver-general of John of Gaunt shows that a sum of money was paid to 'Thomas Chaucer, by name Reynald

Curteys.' On the strength of this evidence it has been suggested that 'Reynald Curteys' was Thomas Chaucer's original name, so that he may have been Geoffrey's adopted or step son, but could not have been his son after the flesh. Would this Reynald Curteys, however, on assuming the name Chaucer, have changed his baptismal name? Is it not more likely that he was a creditor of Thomas Chaucer, who received payment from John of Gaunt? Geoffrey had at least one son, Lewis, but there are indications that Thomas was his heir and successor. Apart from the deed relating to the renewal of the ground lease, to which Mr. Scott has drawn attention, the Park Rolls of Petherton testify that Geoffrey was appointed forester by Elianor, Countess of March, and Thomas, many years later, by Edward, Earl of March. There are grounds for believing, though this also is now, we believe, denied, that Thomas Chaucer joined to the arms of Chaucer those of Roet, and as it has been almost demonstrated that Thomas was the name of Geoffrey's son, it appears that after all the poet's wife was a daughter of Sir Payne Roet, of Hainalt, Guienne king of arms. In the new light that has been shed on the topic the notion that the Philippa Chaucer of 1366 was a cousin or a namesake is less tenable than ever. Already, it is probable, she was Chaucer's wife. Philippa was the sister of Katherine, widow of Sir Hugh Swinford, Knight, who was first governess in the family of John of Gaunt, then his mistress, and finally his wife. And John of Gaunt was the poet's lifelong friend and patron.

Passages in *Troilus and Cressida* and the *House of Fame* have led to the conjecture that Chaucer's marriage was a disappointment. This Poetical Licence. question, in which it is necessary to balance the facts of human nature against the claims of literary fashion, cannot properly be solved. On the surface

it is difficult to reconcile abuse of marriage with happy conjugal relations; but supposing Philippa to have been exceptionally good-natured and tolerant of generalities, she may perhaps have acquiesced with indifference, if not with amusement, in her husband's poetical licence. 'Poetical licence' is a phrase hitherto restricted to violation of petty truth of detail. It might, however, be advantageously extended to the larger truth of imagination. Just as critics have culled from *Troilus and Cressida* and the *House of Fame* evidence of matrimonial infelicity, so also they have found in the *Complaint to Pity* and the *Book of the Duchess* proof or presumption of a luckless love, the object of which was certainly not Philippa. The dates of these compositions are not accurately known, but it may be assumed that the *Book of the Duchess*, and perhaps the *Complaint to Pity*, did not exist in 1366. Hence it has been deduced with small acumen that in 1366 Geoffrey and Philippa were not yet man and wife, and that the Philippa Chaucer of the official records owed her surname to some other circumstance. If there was want of harmony between the pair, is not jealousy the most feasible explanation? The whole problem, however, appears to have been needlessly complicated by insisting on guesses as facts, and by ignoring the wide possibilities of poetical feigning, not to speak of calculated allusions, the exact purpose of which can no longer be ascertained. It is likely enough that Chaucer, in early life, adored some maiden of higher rank than his own; but, whether he did so or not, his warm feeling and rich fancy could readily supply all that went to the making of an elegant trifle like the *Complaint to Pity*. As Ten Brink has pointed out, there was a fashion in this too, and altogether it is hard to imagine that Chaucer's hurt was as bad as he pretends. If we turn

*Complaint to  
Pity.*

to the poem itself, we shall find confirmation of this theory.

Hitherto no model of the *Complaint* has been traced, but few cognoscenti would be much surprised if the main constituents of the poem were found pre-existing in some 'woeful ballad' of French authorship. As will be seen, Chaucer laid French originals freely under contribution, and if the *Complaint* was indeed his earliest attempt at poetical composition, its elaborate structure contradicts the notion that it was indited without external aids and inspiration. The same consideration weakens our faith in the sincerity of his emotions. Where the form exhibits so many artifices, it is natural to surmise that the feeling also is largely, if not entirely, artificial. A suspicious resemblance has been noted between this poem and Statius' *Thebaid*, but the obligation was probably indirect. In the *Book of the Duchess* we encounter a son of Morpheus bearing the odd name 'Eclympasteyre.' In his *Chaucer-Studies* Ten Brink observes: 'I hold this to be a name of Chaucer's own invention.' He then proceeds to intimate a possible derivation. It would seem, however, that in Froissart's *Paradis d'Amour* the God of Dreams has a son Enclimpostair, and in the nature of things Chaucer is more likely to have borrowed from Froissart than *vice versa*. Similarly, in the *Complaint* there is a strange proper name, which is now shown to represent the Greek *erinyes* (Furies). Only in this case the French link is missing. Missing links, however, are often recoverable, and even the 'eight years' of the *Book*, of which biographers have made so much, may yet be paralleled.

Stendhal, in his essay *On Love*, distinguishes between love as taste and love as passion. The love of the *Complaint* is, as has been already hinted, of the former sort. The poem is a sentimental allegory. Chaucer feigns that



he has long wished to approach Pity and enlist her succour against her own rival and his own most bitter enemy, Cruelty. Unable to shape his lips to the utterance of a verbal prayer, he draws up a bill or petition. This he is on the point of presenting when, to his consternation, he makes a discovery mercifully concealed from the rest of mankind—that Pity is dead. There is no possibility of mistake. He sees the corpse lying in state, surrounded by a fair, forbidding company. Bounty and Beauty are there, and Pleasure, and Jollity, and Youth, and Wisdom. Even Assured Manner is not absent from the joyous scene, for joyous it is. Not a tear is shed for the death of poor Pity. All are parties to a conspiracy of which Cruelty is the head and front, and they are in accord to crown the occasion by slaying the poet. Plainly, it is useless to deliver the bill to this assemblage of foes, so Chaucer communicates its contents to the gentle reader. In it he deplores the contrariety of fate. He is crossed in his desires so regularly that he has ceased to care whether he floats or sinks. The *Complaint* has at least two inconsistencies. The picture of the ‘hearse,’ with its gay mutes, is preceded by the announcement that Pity is dead *and buried in a heart*. Professor Skeat suggests that she should be buried out of a heart; but the point is, as it seems to us, that Pity is cold and still just where the poet hoped to find her ardent and active. Herein lies the bitter irony of his vain errand. Later Chaucer appears to have thought he could improve on the idea of burial: hence the vision of Pity dead and lying in state, while his enemies and hers are triumphant spectators of Chaucer’s impotence and misery. The conclusion of the bill is clearly influenced by the vision he thus unexpectedly beholds:

‘Then for your death I may well weep and plain,  
With heartë sore and full of busy pain.’

When the bill was indited, the poet, on his own confession, did not contemplate the death of Pity as remotely possible. The whole poem may be commended as an excellent illustration of love as taste—love, that is to say, pursued in French fashion as a game or pastime, from which real ecstasies, whether of joy or grief, are rigidly excluded, in which all is subordinated to the demands of pleasure or the rules of good breeding. If we would hear the voice of love as passion, Sir Philip Sidney's accents are here particularly apt:

‘Ring out your bells. Let mourning shews be spread,  
For LOVE is dead.

All LOVE is dead, infected  
With plague of deep disdain.’

It would not have been worth while to spend so many words on a short poem, which is, moreover, by no means a favourable specimen of Chaucer's art, were it not for the importance attached to it on psychological grounds. The opinion may be hazarded that it never would have acquired this importance if the whole of Chaucer's juvenilia had been preserved, when it might have transpired that he had as many mistresses as Herrick, and, in relation to each, a goodly variety of moods. There is reason to suspect that the *Complaint to Pity* is not typical of Chaucer's youthful lyric, that something of the roguish humour so characteristic of his later muse was expressed in his early verse as well. At all events, Gower testifies that:

‘In the flowrës of his youth,  
In sundry wise as he well couth,  
Of ditties and of songës glad,  
The which he for my (*i.e.*, Venus') sakë made,  
The land fulfilled is over all.’

If the address to ‘Rosemounde,’ printed in the appendix

of Professor Skeat's later edition of the minor poems, be Chaucer's, as it probably is, here is a glad song, and a humorous. Love works in the poet no lasting skaith, for he allows :

‘ Though I weep of tearës full a tyne,  
Yet may that woe mine heartë not confound.  
Your seemly voice that ye so small out-twine  
Maketh my thought in joy and bliss abound.’

It is a good sign that he can jest on himself :

‘ Was never pike wallowed in galantine  
As I in love am wallowed and y-wound.’

This evidence tends to show that Chaucer's early poems were conventional and complimentary. In another of these new-found ballades mention is made of one of the remedies of love—distraction, divided homage. Chaucer scouts this cure with malediction. Personally, he has neither will nor power to avail himself of it. The allusion, however, is in itself suspicious, and politic denial by no means disproves indulgence in the practice. It ought in fairness to be added that there exists no criterion by which to judge the date of the ballades, which may therefore have been the fruit of his later years.

Love, however, did not absorb all Chaucer's poetic pains.

Amidst his rejoicings and complainings he  
Chaucer's found time to indite (at the instance, it is said,  
A. B. C. of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster) a verse  
reundering of Deguillaume's Prayer to the Virgin. This  
poem is designated Chaucer's A. B. C. for the reason that  
each of the twenty-three stanzas begins, as in the original,  
with a fresh letter of the alphabet. The original is not  
an independent poem, but part of the *Pèlerinage de l'Ame*,  
which French work, dating from the year 1330, has little

or no intrinsic merit, but is interesting as the Catholic and mediæval prototype of the famous Puritan allegory, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Unless common ascription be incorrect, it was rendered into English verse by no less a poet than Lydgate, who, when he comes to the orison, omits to translate it himself, as a task supererogatory :

‘ My master Chaucer, in his time,  
After the French he did it rime.’

As a version, Chaucer's A. B. C. is certainly free—sentences, for instance, are transposed—but it is modelled far too closely on the French to be regarded in any other light. It may be observed, however, that Chaucer's exordium is the more stately and regular, reminding one of Dante's celebrated invocation in the *Paradiso*.

Of the allegorical personages in the *Complaint to Pity* most, if not all, are to be found in the *Romaunt of the Rose*, a poem not so great as long, but which, nevertheless, made an epoch. Over Chaucer it exercised a fascination attested not only by distinct allusions and tacit borrowings, but by a poetical version executed no doubt before his first mission to Italy. That Chaucer accomplished this task, or some portion of it, admits of no question. In the *Legend of Good Women* Love makes the performance a reproach to him :

‘ In plain text withouten need of glose  
Thou hast translated the Rōmaunce of the Rose.’

Eustache Deschamps, also, in a hyperbolical ballade, compliments him on translating the Book of the Rose in good English. If, as one naturally supposes, these expressions relate to the entire poem—Love's reprimand would imply that his faithless or unwise servant had dealt with the

second as well as the first part—the disproportion between Chaucer's original verse, such of it as survives, of the pre-Italian period and the poetical harvest of his later years becomes intelligible. The translation of a work embracing more than twenty thousand lines must wellnigh have absorbed his energies. When, however, we reflect that three of Chaucer's most ambitious attempts—the *House of Fame*, the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Canterbury Tales*—remained unfinished, it seems not unlikely that the poet may have wearied of his task before prosecuting it to its conclusion, and after a spell of continuous labour contented himself with snatches and excursions. This would be yet more probable if he felt that the portion already completed stood in need of revision in order to make it accord with a later and higher standard of art.

These conditions are exactly realized in a large fragment, entitled the *Romaunt of the Rose*, that has come to us from the fourteenth century; hence a strong temptation to find in it the identical translation of which Chaucer was the maker. To this course, which at first appears so reasonable, objection is taken on both philological and metrical grounds. Northern forms occur, of which no trace exists in Chaucer's unquestioned compositions, and the rhymes are, on the whole, much less nice than Chaucer's fastidious ear would have tolerated at his best. It has been remarked, however, that the departures from his customary rules are much less glaring and frequent in lines 1-1705 than in those which follow. This section is accordingly received by some experts—*e.g.*, Herr Kaluza and Professor Skeat—as genuine. Lines 1706-8810 are unceremoniously rejected, and the remainder is adjudged doubtful. The appearance of Northern forms, though singular, is not inexplicable. Apart from the want of fixity in the language—'the great diversity in English,' to

which Chaucer himself refers in one of the concluding stanzas of *Troilus and Cressida*—there is the fact that, while in the service of the Countess of Ulster, the poet spent some, perhaps much, time at Hatfield in Yorkshire. He may also have been acquainted with the *Northumberland Psalter* and other writings, and this may have affected his diction.

The translation of the *Romance of the Rose* is believed to have preceded the composition of the *Book of the Duchess*, in which a passage from the *Romance* has been appropriated; and it has been thought that in the *Book* Chaucer quotes from his own version. If so, that version cannot be identified with the existing fragment, in which the passage is otherwise worded. The loss of the translation would not be extraordinary. Other writings of Chaucer have perished. Without again alluding to the ‘fresh ditties, complaints, ballades, roundels, and virelais,’ the vanished *Book of the Lion*, based, it would seem, on Machault’s *Dit*, represents a serious gap. The same may perhaps be said of ‘all the love of Palamon and Arcite,’ of which Chaucer says that it was little known. The treatises of Origen on the Magdalen and of Innocent on the Wretched Engendering of Mankind, with the translation of which Chaucer beguiled his leisure hours, have gone the way of the *Book of the Lion*, but English literature can better spare them.

Whether we possess Chaucer’s version of the *Romance* or not, it is clear that the study of the original was to him, as to others, an education. The poem may be described as the transformation of the North French *chanson de geste* under the influence of the softer poetry of the South. The *trouvère*, unable to cast aside the traditions of combat, adopts nevertheless the subject-matter of the troubadour. Venus again conquers Mars. In another way the *Romance* may be defined as an allegory of aspiring Love, of Love as

yet unblest and seeking to be crowned. There is no need to inquire too curiously what sort of love. Possibly, at the bottom, a low type of passion, but capable of being transformed, at the will of the reader, into the purest, most abstract, most sublime. For example, quest of the Philosopher's Stone or adoration of Mary. Primarily, however, the Rose typifies maidenhead, and any other construction imposed on the *Romance* is of a piece with mystical renderings of the *Song of Solomon*.

As Guillaume de Lorris conceived it—about the year 1230—the *Romance of the Rose* is undoubtedly a pretty poem. It is impossible here to present more than the barest outline of the story, but essentially it is as follows. On a May morning, amid the carolling of birds, the hero enters a walled garden, where blooming dames and mirthful squires, young and beautiful as angels, disport themselves. One of their number, the Lady Courtesy, bids him welcome, and he is allowed to inspect the wonders of their fair domain. It so happens that these are all reflected in a magic fountain, the Well of Love—the same in which Narcissus looked to his undoing. In the depth of this fountain he beholds the image of a rose, essays to pluck, and is assailed by keen desires symbolized by the arrows of the God of Love, who has been, as it were, stalking him, and now seizes the occasion to reduce him to his obeisance. Thus far the prologue. The staple of the narrative is composed of the hero's endeavours to possess himself of the beloved flower. The denizens of the garden are divided into two camps. Some sympathize with the lover; others are actively hostile—notably Danger, in whose custody, principally, is the Rose. Kind Reception (Bel Accueil), on the other hand, is considerate, but in the end fares badly, and is shut up in a tower by Jealousy. Lorris had not



proceeded much beyond this when necessity or choice—maybe, untimely death—caused him to break off. The thread of the story was resumed some forty years later by Jean Clopinel (or, as he is usually named, Jean le Meung). In the continuation Love with his barons delivers a regular assault on the fortress. Even he, however, fails to rescue his vassal from duress, and the lover's case appears desperate. In these straits Love repairs to Cythera, and persuades his mother to quit Adonis and aid his emprise. On the intervention of the puissant goddess, all goes well. Kind Reception is set free, and the lover, so long baffled, suffered to cull his Rose.

Whether Lorrin would have approved of this conclusion, or indeed of the resolve to continue his work at all, cannot be decided, but it seems safe to speculate that he would not have relished the way in which a huge tree of knowledge was grafted on the slender stem of his parable. As regards the first part of the *Romance*, the interest is largely philosophical. It broaches symbolically the universals of love. In the second part philosophy discovers another mode of expressing itself. By means of such personages as Reason and the Friend there is imported into the *Romance* a strain of scepticism totally at variance with its pristine character. Reason commends friendship or diffusion of love as better than concentration of it on a single object. The Friend, too, is a man of the world. He revels in demolishing illusions, in exposing the frailties of women, in exaggerating the horrors of marriage. The satirist does not think amiss of the ideal union of which his sorry instances are caricatures, but the conditions of life in an artificial state of society render it difficult of attainment. This portion of the poem gave much offence to ladies, and Christine de Pisan sums up her opinion of the *Romance* by saying:

‘Se bien veux et chastement vivre,  
De la Rose ne lis le livre.’

So, too, in the *Legend of Good Women*, Love declares that it is a heresy against his law, and causes wise people to withdraw from him. The *Romance of the Rose*, in its later extension, so far exceeds its primitive limits as to anticipate the Reformation, and frankly avow Jacobinical principles.

Chaucer's first attempt to turn to the highest account the studies he had made in French literature seems to have been the *Book of the Duchess*. Even here he has no thought of vindicating his independence, as numerous passages imitated from Machault or the *Romance of the Rose* abundantly testify. The inspiration lay, indeed, less in any artistic motive or in the bidding of genius than in incidents of Chaucer's life at Court. The tradition that his *A. B. C.* was written at the request of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, has been already noticed. She appears to have been a model young lady, and by her death in 1369 the English Court was plunged into the deepest mourning. Chaucer could not escape the infection of sorrow; and, in order to manifest his sympathy with the survivors, and especially with the young widower—ultimately to become ‘old John of Gaunt’—resolved to enshrine the memory of the incomparable princess in an allusive eulogy. It is long, however, before we get hint of his intention. At first he seems wrapt up in himself, and in his own ills. He has been crossed in love, and complains he cannot sleep. He dips into an old story-book. This is none other than Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, though it is plain from internal indications that Machault's *Dit de la Fontaine Amoureuse* is also close at elbow. The particular narrative that engages his attention is that of Ceyx and Alcyone, wherein,

at the apparition of her drowned spouse, the loving queen dies of grief. Now in the Introduction to the Prologue of the *Man of Law's Tale* it is written of Chaucer that 'in his youth he made of Ceys and Alcioun.' Probably, therefore, this section of the *Book* was originally a separate poem, and has been inserted partly for its merit, but still more as a record of marital devotion, the coming vision casting, as it were, its shadow before.

After a disproportionately long preface, Chaucer at last enters on the main theme. The transition is marked by naïve reflexions suggested by his reading, and his promise to reward the strange god Morpheus with a sumptuous feather-bed in return for a little sleep, though possibly out of place in a poem of this description, is a rich bit of Chaucerian humour. The vow produces an effect. The poet is soon in a world of dreams, the gay enjoyment of which is in sharp contrast with the clouded spirits and dull lethargy to which he had previously confessed.

He imagines it is May. At dawn he is aroused from slumber by the loud sweet melody of a swarm of small birds on his chamber-roof, rehearsing their solemn service. The chamber in which he finds himself does not lack splendour. The windows are charged with the Story of Troy and the Romance of the Rose, and through the emblazoned panes the mounting sun casts his effulgence on the bed. The awakened poet hears sound of horn, at which signal he quits his chamber, and, taking horse, joins himself to a large company of huntsmen. He shares actively in the chase, the details of which are rendered with vividness and technical accuracy. Finally, however, the hounds are called off, and the poet, released from his guard, is in the wood alone. At this juncture his attention is attracted by the antics of an irrepressible little dog, which, by fawning and grovelling and darting away, induces the poet to

follow him through a flowery glade. The mystery is soon cleared up. Ere long he perceives a comely young man, dressed in black and sitting with his back to a huge oak, in evident distress.

The poet now shows his Court breeding in the exquisite tact with which he approaches the stranger and elicits his secret. The cause of his sorrow, it appears, is a woman, the best and fairest of her sex; and the knight, once his tongue is set wagging, ecstatically dilates on her moral and physical charms. The wooing of this matchless creature, and the perfect wedded life of knight and lady, are next described with consummate art and evident sympathy. Particularly noticeable is Chaucer's delicate portraiture of feminine traits—for instance, the 'fair white's' maidenly reserve, which is as far as possible removed from prudery. In spite of significant hints (as where Fortune, in a game of chess, is said to have taken the queen), the poet is slow to grasp the precise relation between the knight's story and his present misery. At last the truth strikes him, and he exclaims with the curtness of pained surprise:

'Is that your loss? By God, it is ruth.'

It is remarkable that Chaucer gives John of Gaunt's age wrong—an inaccuracy which may have been deliberate.

When one considers the various ingredients of which it is composed, one is constrained to allow that the *Book of the Duchess* is a triumph of assimilation. If the researches of scholars had not laid bare Chaucer's many obligations to his French predecessors, very few readers would have suspected them—none, probably, from any incongruities in the poem itself. While, however, the elevated feeling that animates it, and the recurrence of an unmistakable personal note, redeem the work from being only a dishonest cento, or skilfully wrought mosaic, the *Book of the Duchess*

must necessarily forego the praise due to more self-reliant compositions. It would be possible to draw an interesting parallel, in this regard, between Chaucer and Longfellow. In both the creative instinct was tempered by a not ungracious modesty, by strong admiration of the literary achievements of others. Both were whole-hearted disciples of Dante. Both began by translation, and the presence of some *terzines* from the *Commedia* in Longfellow's *Voices of the Night* is to be explained on essentially the same principle as reminiscences of favourite French verse in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*. Where Chaucer copies, the imitation must be taken rather as translation, or as literary convention, than as corrupt and wilful plagiarism. The *Romance of the Rose* was too famous a work, and too well-thumbed, for imitation to remain undetected.

## CHAPTER VII.

### CHAUCER'S ITALIAN PERIOD.

FROM the descriptions of Deschamps it results that the poet-errant of the fourteenth century found Diplomacy. travelling none too easy. He was sometimes employed in the quality of envoy—Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Deschamps himself, Chaucer, all fulfilled this function—and, apart from the profit of them, the chief satisfaction derived from these missions was that they enabled him to see the world at the public expense. The glory seems to have been slight. Deschamps uses the term ‘ambassador’ convertibly with ‘messenger,’ and the envoy of those days sometimes answered more nearly to the *legatus* of Cæsar’s *Commentaries* than to the princely personage who succeeded. According to Deschamps’ account, his official experiences were singularly different from those we commonly associate with a stately embassy. It was not so much travelling as campaigning. Take, for instance, the lodging. In central Europe—things may have been better in France and the peninsulas—

‘Chacun ne git mie à part soi,  
Mais deux à deux en chambre obscure,  
Ou le plus souvent trois à trois  
En un seul lit, à l’aventure.’

Chaucer’s first trial of diplomacy appears to have occurred in 1370, when he was abroad for some time on the king’s

service. The nature of his employment has not transpired, but he received letters of protection against creditors during his term of absence. This precaution was a regular feature of Chaucer's foreign tours, and suggests either chronic indebtedness, or that the rapacity of creditors was extreme. Concerning his second mission we are better informed. On the 11th of November, 1372, he was associated with two natives of Genoa, Sir James Pronare and John de Mari, in an embassy to the Doge, merchants and citizens of Genoa regarding the selection of an English port, where the Genoese might establish a factory, and on similar business. Of the three John de Mari commanded the greatest confidence, since it was laid down that any two of the commissioners were competent to settle a question, provided that John de Mari was one of them. In February, 1377, Chaucer attended Sir Thomas Percy in a secret mission to Flanders, and the April of the same year found him in France. According to Froissart, Sir Guichard d'Angle, whom Chaucer probably accompanied, was empowered to conclude a treaty of marriage between Prince Richard of England and Princess Mary of France, but the object of the mission was not avowed. In June King Edward died, and in January of the following year Sir Guichard set out on a fresh mission, Chaucer being a member of his suite. This time no concealment was made; the errand was overtly matrimonial.

In the month of May of the same year, 1378, Chaucer was despatched with Sir Edward Berkeley to Lombardy, where they were to treat with Bernardo Visconti, Lord of Milan, and Sir John Hawkwood 'on certain affairs touching the expediting of the king's war.' Respecting the actual mission we know nothing, but incidental traits conspire to invest it with more than ordinary interest. Bernardo Visconti's imprisonment and death are commemorated as



one of the tragedies in the *Monk's Tale*. There is, however, not a word to indicate that the poet had ever come into personal contact with this 'god of delight.' As for Sir John Hawkwood, perhaps the greatest of all free lances, a soldier in the sense of *soldatus*, he was chief of the famous White Company of English spears, the admiration of the Italians. Until the date of Berkeley's mission Hawkwood had taken the Pope's pay and fought the Pope's battles. He had now turned his back on his old master and was in sworn league with the Pope's enemy, Visconti. In Letter XV. of his *Fors Clavigera* Ruskin makes charming allusion to this soldier of fortune: 'Sir John Hawkwood did not take the command until 1364, when the Pisans hired the company, five thousand strong, at the rate of a hundred and fifty thousand golden florins for six months, I think about fifty thousand pounds of our money a month, or ten pounds a man—Sir John himself being then described as a great general, an Englishman of a vulpine nature, and astute in *their* fashion. This English fashion of astuteness means, I am happy to say, that Sir John saw far, planned deeply, and was cunning in military stratagem, but would neither poison his enemies, nor sell his friends—the two words of course being always understood as for the time being. . . .' What lends additional interest to the occasion is the fact that, before his departure, Chaucer named two proxies to represent him in the event of legal proceedings, and one of these was John Gower. The other was a forgotten Richard Forrester.

It may be worth while to record the sums the two envoys received for their services over-sea. Sir Edward Berkeley obtained £130 6s. 8d., and Chaucer £56 13s. 4d. These payments were equivalent to ten times the amount in our present currency. As we are ignorant of the duration of the mission, and the disbursements no doubt covered all

expenses, they supply no clue to Chaucer's pecuniary gains, but they throw welcome light on the poet's dignity and importance. It was, of course, not to be expected that he would take equal rank with Berkeley. On the other hand, he was remunerated on a scale much above a private secretary.

Chaucer's appointments were not confined to occasional missions. In June, 1374, he was made Home Comptroller of the Customs and Subsidy of Appointments. Wools, Skins, and tanned Hides in the Port of London. This stroke of fortune had one drawback, for, while it secured regular employment and therefore regular pay, he was under the obligation of writing the rolls of his office with his own hand, and of being continually present. Obviously, these conditions threatened his career as a poet. That, however, was not all. Chaucer was now an established favourite of John of Gaunt, through whose influence apparently he was accorded this desirable post in, as we may say, the civil service. In the same month, the prince gave further proof of his satisfaction by granting Chaucer and his wife a pension of £10 (or £100 of our money). Thanks to his friends at Court, also, several *bonnes bouches*, including a couple of wardships and a forfeit, were put in his way. Accordingly, during this decade Chaucer attained the high-water mark of worldly prosperity; and though official ties were unfriendly to the exercise of poetical faculty, these years are of extreme significance for his inner development, the enlargement of his spiritual vision.

It is accepted by most scholars nowadays that all Chaucer's poems exhibiting traces of Italian influence must have been written after the period of his first mission to the peninsula. It would be feasible, without violating the principles of chronology laboriously worked out in relation to his writings, to constitute the second mission the border-line; while it seems

The Leaven  
of Italy.

improbable, in spite of preoccupations, that the leaven of Italian would have taken long to manifest itself in the life of one who, to use a modern vulgarism, was eminently 'up-to-date.' The late Professor Morley supported the thesis that Chaucer became acquainted with Italian even before 1372, and that it was his knowledge of Italian that led to his selection as envoy. If he could speak Italian, that would no doubt be a very good reason why Chaucer should be preferred to Englishmen not conversant with the language. On the other hand, it must be remembered that his fellow-commissioners were Genoese able, from the circumstances of the case, to speak French, if not English as well, so that Chaucer's inclusion may have been due to other than linguistic considerations—possibly to John of Gaunt's desire to assist his fortunes, and his own love of travel and adventure. In his *House of Fame* he talks of adventure as 'the mother of tidings'; and, in another passage of the same poem—itself the fruit of residence in Italy—he employs language that may well bear on the spirit of intelligent curiosity with which he entered on his journeys:

' For certainly, he that me made  
To comen hither, saidē me,  
I shouldē both hear and see  
In this placē wonder things.'

The question, however, whether Chaucer could *speak* Italian is beside the mark, since it is clear that, as late as 1369, he was a complete stranger to Italian literature. The *Book of the Duchess*, as we have seen, abounds in reminiscences of French studies, but of Italian colour there is absolutely nothing—not a passage, not a phrase, not even a word. In some of his later poems Chaucer has no scruple in proving that he has visited Italy, and an earlier prudery is improbable, unintelligible. But, while

this is the case, it does not follow that he hastened to publish his productions as soon as written. Elegy and epithalamium could not be pigeon-holed in obscurity without defeating their intention, but other pieces might have been held in reserve until fit occasion offered for giving them to the light. This, in effect, appears to have been the fate of certain verse which we cannot be wrong in attributing to Italian inspiration. The Prologue of the *Clerk's Tale*, for which a niche has been found in the Canterbury collection, contains an avowal in the manner of one who has travelled and is not sorry to impress his listeners with allusions out of the common :

'I will you tell a talë which that I  
Learned at Padua of a worthy clerk,  
As proved by his wordës and his work.  
He is now dead and nailed in his chest,  
I pray to God so give his soulë rest.

Francis Petrarch, the laureate poete,  
Hightë this clerk, whose rhetorickë sweet  
Illumined all Itail of poetry,  
As Linian did of philosophy,  
Or law or other art particular;  
But Death that will not suffer us dwell here,  
But as it were the twinkling of an eye,  
Them both hath slain, and allë shall we die.

But forth to tellë of this worthy man  
That taughtë me this tale.' . . .

In these lines Chaucer does not expressly affirm that *he* learnt the story from Petrarch. It is the Clerk of Oxford that claims to have done so. Nevertheless, a natural instinct has caused these statements to be regarded as historical, as literally true of the poet; and, in spite of the difficulties suggested, the majority of persons are hardly to be persuaded out of

Chaucer and  
Petrarch.

the notion that such or some such interview took place. In his *Histoire de la Langue et de la Littérature françaises* M. Aubertin affirms that Chaucer and Froissart were present (Petrarch certainly was) at the wedding of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, with the daughter of Galeazzo Visconti in 1368. The official list of the duke's suite makes no mention of Chaucer, nor have we been able to discover the passage in Froissart, on which M. Aubertin's statement is apparently based. Supposing, however, Chaucer to have been introduced to Petrarch in 1368, the fact would explain a subsequent meeting in 1372, when the Italian poet is known to have been keenly interested in this very tale. Boccaccio had sent him a copy of his Italian version, which Petrarch, by way of compliment, translated into Latin; and it was from Petrarch's Latin that Chaucer, beyond doubt or dispute, derived his *Clerk's Tale*. As Petrarch probably infected Chaucer with his own enthusiasm, the theory is that the Englishman then, or soon after, turned the story into verse; and when his creature, the Canterbury pilgrim, is called upon to recite, presented him with this poem composed many years before. At the same time he puts into his mouth the preface, part of which has been quoted, with the expectation that people will have wit enough to read between the lines, and not deprive him of an acquaintance of which he is rightly proud.

The tale of which Petrarch was so enamoured that he learnt it by heart in order to repeat it to others was the story of patient Griselda. Probably it was the 'laureate poet's' *imprimatur*, even more than its intrinsic merits, that made the fortune of the tale, since Chaucer was not alone in citing his approbation. The author of the *Ménagier de Paris* writing towards 1393, observes that he is about to draw an example 'translaté par maistre François Petrarque qui à

Romme fut couronné poete.' However that may be, the story won an European popularity. It has been dramatized by Apostolo Zeno in Italy; by Hans Sachs in Germany; by Dekker, Chettle, and Haughton, conjointly, in England; and by Armand Silvestre, quite recently, in France. A 'mystery,' however, of which Griselda was the heroine, was played at Paris as early as 1398. There could be no surer proof of the popular quality of the tale, but others are perhaps as sure. Like *Guy of Warwick*, the topic was appropriated by ballad-mongers; and both in Italy and in England scenes from the life of Griselda have adorned the homes of the poor, to whom as a class the tale is a spiritual possession. It may be added that the National Gallery contains a picture by Pintoricchio, in which several of the incidents are excellently set forth.

It is not difficult to account for the vogue achieved by this story, which, at the commencement, bears distinct resemblance to those of Cinderella and King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid. This instance, however, is peculiar, inasmuch as the interest, instead of culminating, only begins with the marriage of parties unequally yoked, nor is it by any means the case that the lovers are happy ever after. Experienced persons foresee that, and, having proceeded a little way with the tale, promise themselves an ample feast of connubial woes. The feast is indeed ample, but the woes are not, in all respects, such as might have been anticipated. It is a common proverb that marriage is a lottery. To reduce the chances of failure Walter, Marquis de Seluce, has recourse to a double expedient. In the first place he weds a peasant girl he has observed when out hunting, and with whom he has fallen in love in a pure and honourable way. With her views and training Griselda is not perhaps the sort of bride to vex him by opposition and caprice. Walter, however, seeks to convert prob-

ability into certainty by a bargain. Before he marries her, he insists on a fair understanding that she is to submit to his good pleasure, and, let him do what he may, neither chide nor frown. In external circumstance his equal, Griselda was to be still his slave in heart. Curious inversion of the morganatic marriage! This was a fond and foolish proceeding, as far as Walter was concerned. If Griselda had been a typical woman only, but still more if she had been in any great degree shrewd and shrewish, her promise would soon have proved worthless. However, she gives her word; Walter, content, acknowledges her as his wedded wife. After two children have been born to them, the Devil enters into the Marquis to aggravate his folly. He has no fault to find with his wife—she has been to him all that he could expect—but he harbours an idle wish to test her to the uttermost. At her lord's behest the sergent comes to take away her babes—first girl; then boy—and murder them. The pretext is that her offspring are half-churls, that the people murmur at the blood of Janicle. But it is only a pretext. No doubt the general sentiment requires that a man should *κηδεύειν καθ' ἑαυτόν*, and the 'other maidens' must have envied their companion somewhat; but if it had come to the point, the marquis would have beld his purpose:

‘As lordës do when they will have their way.’

However, his purpose now is, not to override the wishes of his lieges, but to flay the feelings, to try the temper of his loving wife. After thirteen or fourteen years of wedlock, he tells her that ‘he may not do as every ploughman may,’ and must get him a new wife. Again, he says, it is his people that constrain him, though, the fame of his ill-deeds having got abroad, his people really wonder what sort of monster they have over them. Stripped of her



fine clothes, Griselda goes home to her father. Then Walter, having obtained papal dispensation, makes preparations for a grand wedding. With refined cruelty he requires Griselda to assist—women are scarce, it seems—and finally shows her the bride-elect. Then the poor creature utters the first words that might appear a reproach. Interceding for the young thing who has arrived to fill her place, and whose beauty she has generously praised, she adds :

‘ One thing beseech I you and warn also,  
That ye ne prickē with no tormenting  
This tender maiden, as ye have done mo (*others*) ;  
For she is fostered in her nourishing  
More tenderly, and, to my supposing,  
She couldē not adversity endure,  
As couldē a poor fostered crēature.’

This is more than even Walter can stand, and he at once discloses his clownish pranks, his theatrical villainies. The pretended bride is Griselda’s own daughter, who, by arrangement, had been brought up by her uncle. Her son, too, is not dead, and will in due time succeed his father in the marquisate. Griselda, overwhelmed with joy at these discoveries, calls her children, embraces, kisses them ‘ full like a mother.’ The simple pathos of her speech could not be outdone :

‘ O tender, O dear, O youngē children mine,  
Your woeful mother weenēd steadfastly  
That cruel houndēs or some foul vermine  
Had eaten you ; but God of his mercȳ,  
And your benignē father tenderly  
Hath done you kept.’

Thereafter Walter and his spouse continue in a peace that he, at least, has not deserved.

Told in outline, the story of Griselda is sufficiently crude; but, as Chaucer tells it, it is not crude at all. The poet was not only a great clerk, but a wise man; he was not only a wise man, but a man of feeling. He throws his warm sympathies into the recital. Without taking liberties with the story, he interpolates effective asides, in which he keenly champions the heroine:

‘He had essayèd her enough before,  
And found her ever good, what needeth it  
Herë to tempt, and alway more and more?  
Though some men praise it for a subtile wit.  
But as for me I say that evil it sit  
To essay a wife when that it is no need,  
And putë her in anguish and in dread.’

Later, he states the case by describing the treatment to which Griselda is subjected as ‘wicked usage.’ Walter’s conduct is past apologizing for. He is a matrimonial ‘plunger’ or heartless doctrinaire, who values his own whim above the happiness of others, and pursues a senseless design beyond the limits of toleration, in a spirit of vicious pigheadedness. What of Griselda, however? M. Jusserand is hardly fair, when he remarks: ‘Grisélidis, c’est Patience, sans plus; à cette vertu tout est sacrifié; Grisélidis n’est pas femme, ni mère; elle n’est que l’épouse patiente, Patience faite épouse.’ There is a sense wherein this comment is just. We readily concede that Griselda is not an average woman, nor an average mother. But when we meet with very patient people in real life—people patient on principle—we think and speak of them, not as abstractions, but as saints. Griselda is essentially of this order. Obedience to her husband is her religion; and, just as mothers have been known to sacrifice their children to the sacred cause of country, so she gives up hers in the supposed interest of her fantastic consort.

Griselda is a very wife, and she comes not far short of being a very mother as well. Her store of womanly feeling is never in doubt; and the scenes in which she parts from her children, and that in which she is again united with them, cannot be perused without emotion. Chaucer, then, has set himself to depict a saint, and he has succeeded. But, before he reaches the conclusion, even Chaucer questions whether such surrender of soul to a fellow-mortal can be really justified. Accordingly, he deduces from the story the lesson of submission to the decrees of Providence.

The merits of the composition do not consist only in the conduct of the narrative. The sustained charm of the rhythm, the beautiful, sincere, expressive English give Chaucer an appreciable advantage over the 'high style' of Petrarch inditing in a dead tongue. The stanza-form is regarded as proof that the poem was not written for the *Canterbury Tales*, in which the regular metre is the heroic couplet. Chaucer, however, adapted it for its place by adding two stanzas, in which allusion is made to Metre. the Wife of Bath. At the same time he tacked on an envoy of thirty-six lines, half humorous, half cynical, and wholly unlike the tale itself, which is throughout serious. This envoy, by the way, is a feat in rhyming. The order of the rhymes is *ababcb*; and in all six stanzas the endings are the same. In the body of the tale a seven-line stanza is employed, which begins with alternate rhymes and ends with couplets. The three rhymes are thus disposed: *ababbcc*. The *Clerk's Tale* is not the only specimen of this particular verse in the *Canterbury* series. The so-called *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Man of Law's Tale* are both in seven-line stanzas of this pattern; and, apart from metre, all three stories have a common feature, in that they are all concerned with the

marital relation. As regards the *Second Nun's Tale*, the influence of Italian literature appears in the invocation of Mary, which is closely modelled on a famous passage in Dante's *Paradiso*. Indeed, a large portion is fairly described as a translation in the sense already explained in relation to the A. B. C. The matter of the *Man of Law's Tale* is apparently free from Italian admixture, but the form is significant, not only from its identity with that of the two kindred compositions, but on general grounds.

The old French verse for narrative poetry, which Chaucer imitated, *e.g.*, in the *Death of Blanche*, was the octosyllabic couplet. The stanza was employed, but for lyric verse. Then Dante appears to have invented the *terza rima*, in which the second line of the first and the first and third lines of the second stanza have the same rhyme-endings, and so on *ad infinitum*. As each pair of consecutive *terzines*—the second standing to the third as the first to the second—are connected by the interlacing rhyme, they may be regarded in some sort as forming a six-line stanza, thus: *ababcb*. This, it will be noticed, is the identical stanza of Chaucer's envoy to the *Clerk's Tale*. His ordinary stanza, as we have seen, varies from this formula, and appears to be based on the *ottava rima*, of which Boccaccio is considered to have been the inventor, and which is the metre of the later Italian epics. This metre seems to have been a development of the *terza rima*, which Boccaccio also used, another *a* being substituted for the *e* rhyme, and each stanza being brought to a definite close by means of a couplet. The *ottava rima* therefore consists of eight lines, and the order of the rhymes is as follows: *abababcc*. Chaucer's final couplet is thus accounted for, but this is preceded by two consecutive *b* rhymes, an arrangement which may be traced perhaps to the influence of the *ballade*, of which the scheme is: *ababbcbca*.

Neither the *Man of Law's Tale* nor the *Second Nun's Tale* is founded on an Italian original. The former was taken from Trivet's Anglo-Norman Chronicle, written in 1334; and the latter direct from that great repository of Christian lore, the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus a Voragine, though Chaucer has consulted and copied Jean de Vignay's French translation of the same. Of both the heroines belong to Old Rome. Cecily, whose virtues are rehearsed (conventionally, anyhow) by the Second Nun, is a Christian virgin married against her will, who, with the help of Pope Urban, converts her husband Valerian, and induces him to adopt, in his relations with her, the self-denying ordinance of Edward the Confessor. Already, she says, she is wedded to an angel. The story farther records Cecily's bold confession before the pagan judge, and her martyrdom. The *Man of Law's Tale* deals with a later stage in the history of the Eternal City. Here the heroine is the daughter of a Christian Emperor. She is of peerless beauty, and the fame of her loveliness is carried into many lands. Amongst the rest the young Soldan of Syria hears of the Roman princess. He gossips with merchants, and the merchants inflame his admiration to such a pitch that he cannot rest, save he marry her. But this he may not do unless he consents to abjure his religion. The Romans perceive in this suit opportunity for a great *coup*—the ending of Maumetry; Constance is to be the instrument of wholesale conversion to the faith. The Soldan's passion leaves him no choice. He agrees to be christened; and so does the old Soldaness, his mother, but only as a ruse.

'Cold water shall not grieve us but a lite (*little*),'

sne observes cheerfully, but, false at heart, bides her time

and then causes her son to be stabbed as he sits at table. His bride is put on board a boat and set forth on the waste of waters. Wind and wave bear her along until she reaches 'our ocean.' Landing on the coast of Britain, she meets with hospitable treatment from the Constable and his wife Ermengild. However, the princess's ill-luck pursues her. A knight becomes enamoured of her, and because she will not yield to his wishes wreaks dastardly vengeance. As Constance and Ermengild lie in one bed, he slays her friend, and charges the murder on Constance. A miracle proves and punishes his guilt and acquits the fair stranger, whom now the king marries. Alla (*i.e.*, Ella), a renowned warrior, sets out to fight the Scots. During his absence his wife is delivered of a boy, and a messenger departs with the glad tidings. He is, however, intercepted by the queen-dowager Donegild, who, in a letter to her son, misrepresents the event, and, cruel as the Soldaness, forces Constance to embark with her babe in the same boat wherein she had landed. On his return Alla, in a fit of fury, kills his mother, and then goes to Rome to do penance for his crime. Here he lights on his lost Constance, and, as soon as possible, the pair return to Britain, where they live happily. A year passes, after which Death, who 'taketh of high and low his rent,' will not suffer their bliss to be prolonged. Constance takes up her abode once more in her native city, and devotes the residue of her days to almsdeed.

The notion of an innocent female exposed to the perils of the sea, and yet worse perils arising out of her desolation, is one of the stock devices of mediæval romance, for which Chaucer need not have gone to Trivet. We meet with similar adventures in the *Faëry Queen*, in which so many old-world faucies receive their last serious setting. Nevertheless, this tale marks, on Chaucer's part, growing

independence. About a third of the poem is made up of his additions, and these additions consist, for the most part, of touches which enliven and enrich the narration:

‘Have ye not seen some time a palë face,  
Among a press, of him that hath been lad (*led*)  
Toward his death, where as him gat no grace,  
And such a colour in his face hath had,  
Men mightë know his face that was bestad (*bestead*)  
Amongës all the faces in that rout?  
So stands Constãce, and looketh her about.’

The simile is worthy of Homer. Gower also treated this theme, and, if we would form a just conception of Chaucer’s art in narration, there can be no better way than a comparison of the two versions. It is, however, more than art, Chaucer’s gracious humanity that transmutes material into which Gower, with his cold talent, can infuse no new and vivid charm.

That we did not err in describing Chaucer’s characteristic seven-line stanza as a blend of the Italian Dante and Chaucer. *ottava rima* and French ballade-verse may be considered proved by the circumstance that the *Monk’s Tale*—yet another of the Canterbury series—is written throughout in the latter metre. This tale—it would be styled more reasonably *tales*—differs from the three already noticed, in that it was undoubtedly produced not all at once, but in sections. The nature of the composition, consisting of a number of independent ‘tragedies,’ favoured and almost invited this desultory mode of procedure. The rubric, ‘Heere begynneth the Monkes Tale, de casibus virorum Illustrium,’ shows plainly enough whence Chaucer borrowed the hint—namely, from Boccaccio’s Latin cycle of that name; and, as the Monk offers the choice of a Life of Saint Edward the Confessor—which Chaucer may have sketched in conjunction with



his Life of Cecily—or some of the hundred tragedies he has in his cell, we thus obtain an insight into the origin and intention of the work. In seventeen uneven stories we have all that Chaucer could or cared to complete of a century of tales dealing with the ‘Falls of Princes.’ This last is the title of a poem—one of his best—by Chaucer’s disciple, Lydgate, who refers to his master’s design rather than performance in the prologue. It is significant that the number of ‘tragedies’ projected corresponds with the number of cantos in the *Divine Comedy*, and one of the ‘tragedies’—the touching account of Count Ugolino and his sons—is taken from that poem. Moreover, the terms ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’ are mutually suggestive, and neither Dante nor Chaucer employs them in the sense ordinarily accepted. These ‘tragedies,’ like the *Comedy*, are narrative poems. It may well seem, therefore, that, while Boccaccio supplied the hint and some portion of the material, the shadow of Dante’s masterpiece loomed in the background, influencing both form and title.

The metre of the *Comedy* Chaucer did not adopt either in this or in any other of his more ambitious undertakings. Apparently he felt it an exotic beyond his power to naturalize; but he did not arrive at that conclusion without personal trial. About this time he wrote the *Complaint to his Lady*, a name not of Chaucer’s bestowing, though, as a title was wanted, Professor Skeat deserves gratitude for inventing one so apt. The poem is a literary sonata in three movements, and in Shirley’s manuscript was copied, not as an independent piece, but frankly as a continuation of the *Complaint to Pity*. Probably it was thought that such flotsam and jetsam must belong to something, and no better solution presented itself than that of wedding the later to the earlier verse. Both poems express the same amorous idea. There are also

verbal and spiritual affinities between the *Complaint to his Lady* and the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and more particularly, *Anelida and Arcite*, for which last it was made to serve as basis. The fragments, however, are chiefly interesting as metrical experiments. The *Complaint* is partly in *terza rima*, a metre Chaucer handles, as he does every metre, without apparent effort. Nevertheless, he must either have realized its difficulty or disliked its effect, for, as has been said, he therewith abandoned *terza rima*, of which English literature can show no subsequent specimen until the age of Shakespeare, when Lord Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt succumbed to the temptation. As *terza rima*—or tierce rhyme, as a translator of Dante rather happily renders it—is even now not largely represented in English verse, a few lines may be quoted to show what could be made of it in the hands of a master of rhythm like Chaucer:

‘Thus am I slain with sorrows full diversë;  
 Full long agoñe I might have taken heedë.  
 Now, soothly, what she hight I will rehearsë;  
 ‘Her name is Bounty, set in womanheadë,  
 Sadness in youth, and Beauty pridëless,  
 And Pleasance, under governance and dreadë.  
 ‘Her surname eke is Fairë Ruthëless,  
 The Wise, y-knit unto good Aventurë,  
 That, for I love her, slay’th me guiltëless.’

Chaucer had a much better chance of reproducing Dante’s rhythm than later English bards, inasmuch as the final vowels were still sounded. Thus, ‘rehearse’ would scan as a trisyllable. Perhaps also the desire for feminine rhymes—not Shirley—may account for the spelling of certain words, such as ‘deel’ (which elsewhere is written ‘del’) and ‘prydelees.’ But masculine rhymes are found,

though rarely, in Dante. The two other varieties of metre are Chaucer's favourite seven-line stanza, and an ample stanza of ten lines, which latter was rejected, or, perhaps it may be said, revised. The nine-line stanza of *Anelida and Arcite* is the form as afterwards amended.

Though the metrical test is not so decisive in the case of the *Complaint of Mars*, the poem is conjectured, not without excellent reason, to pertain to Chaucer's Italian period. As the narrative portion is founded on classical legend, it might no doubt have been written earlier, though the effect of Chaucer's visits to Italy was to bring him into contact with the enthusiasm, there beginning to arise, for the lost worlds of Greece and Rome. A poem on the loves of Mars and Venus would therefore have been a natural effusion at this period. It must be confessed, however, that the lack of any allusions to his Italian masters and indifference to their methods (except in the use of the stanza) tend to discountenance the theory that Chaucer drew inspiration thence. Shirley affirms that the poem was written 'to order';—in his own words, 'at the commandment of the most renowned and excellent prince my lord the Duke John of Lancaster.' It seems that John of Gaunt's wife's sister and brother's wife, the Duchess of York, who had come to England in 1372 as Princess Isabel of Spain, was in youthful days a wanton and intrigued with John Holland, Earl of Huntingdon. It is this affair, disguised as mythology, which, Shirley declares, is the real subject of the *Complaint*. Professor A. W. Ward, with the charity that believeth not all things, is optimistically disposed to pass by this account, which reflects scant credit on Chaucer. On the whole, however, the tradition is not unlikely to be correct.

Mr. Skeat has pointed out one allusion which Chaucer

may have intended as a key. The simile of the brooch of Thebes, so abruptly introduced, so carefully elaborated, will strike some minds as forced, as suggested by an ulterior motive. It is not necessary thus to conceive—the comparison may be pure accident—but, anyhow, it is possible to construct a motive. In her will, dated the 6th of December, 1382, the princess left to the Duke of Lancaster a tablet of jasper which the King of Armony had given her. Now the magic bracelet (or brooch, as it is here called) belonged in the first instance to Harmonia, a daughter of Mars and Venus. There is an evident similarity between the names ‘Harmonia’ and ‘Armony’—especially as the letter ‘h’ did not count for much in classical terms, many of which came by way of France—and the similarity may have occurred to Chaucer. This conclusion is weakened by the fact that the name ‘Harmonia’ does not appear in the poem, though it may have impressed itself on Chaucer’s mind. However, the important fact remains. The princess had a trinket of some interest, which, about the date of the *Complaint*, she bequeathed to the Duke of Lancaster, to whom the inception of the poem is said to have been due.

What most attracts us to the theory of a hidden, mystical meaning is the parallel instance of the *Book of the Duchess*, with regard to which nobody harbours the least doubt that a veil, not very thin or transparent, conceals actual persons and actual occurrences. There also a single hint unmasks the unsuspected allegory. Granting that in these two cases Chaucer dedicated his muse to the solacing or amusement of the great duke, it is not so certain that yet a third poem may not be brought within the same category—namely, *Anelida and Arcite*. This unfinished production, which, so to speak, assimilated the *Complaint to his Lady*, may have borne some relation to

a work which Chaucer, in the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, describes as ‘all the love of *Anelida and Arcite*. Palamon and Arcite.’ From this reference one would infer that the work in question, though stated to be little known, was still acknowledged when the prologue was inditing—presumably some four or five years after the date of *Anelida and Arcite*. *Palamon and Arcite*—the poem is now lost—appears to have been a rather close translation of Boccaccio’s *Teseide*, in which, however, the seven-line stanza was substituted for the *ottava*. By the time Chaucer came to address himself to the *Canterbury Tales*, he seems to have satisfied himself that the obscurity of *Palamon and Arcite* was merited, for then it was that he recast the story in heroic couplets, the form in which we have received it. This metre, associated with the poet’s latest phase, is the principal reason for rejecting the, perhaps not indefensible, theory that the *Knight’s Tale* is an abridgment of *Palamon and Arcite*.

The *Complaint* of fair Anelida and false Arcite is based partly on Boccaccio’s poem, the *Teseide*, and partly on Boccaccio’s original, the *Thebaid* of Statius. It has been suggested that some of the stanzas have been borrowed from Chaucer’s own *Palamon and Arcite*, but the thought is hard to reconcile with the subsequent allusion to the latter as extant. It is, however, a curious fact, of which an illustration has already occurred as between the rejected *Complaint to his Lady* and *Anelida and Arcite*, that Chaucer felt no scruple in transferring individual lines from earlier to later compositions. Several lines of *Anelida and Arcite* are again used in the *Knight’s Tale*. This is the more surprising, as the two poems are in spirit utterly distinct. Indeed, the only thing that connects them is the name ‘Arcite’; but the true Arcite—not true to his friend Palamon, however—is a very different being

from the false Arcite, whose prototype must accordingly be sought elsewhere. If we could have access to a *chronique scandaleuse* of Court flirtations in the reign of Edward III.—himself the greatest of transgressors—the ‘thief’ might perhaps be identified. As it is, we must be content with guessing that there was a ‘thief’ other than the villain of the piece.

This time the complainant is a lady. Following his usual procedure, Chaucer, after a brief prologue, furnishes an epic introduction, in which the condition of affairs is fully disclosed. The *fons et origo* of the trouble was tyrannical old Creon, who compelled the Theban gentlefolks to live in town. In this way the lovely Queen of Armenia was exposed to the wiles of a young knight Arcite, who paid court to her. Now Arcite was one of those men whose ruling principle in their dealings with women is the inflation of their own vanity. Incapable of steady attachment, their ‘newfangledness’ leads them from one conquest to another, indifferent to, if not exulting in, the broken hearts they leave behind. In Anelida Chaucer labours to paint for us the kind of woman who, of all others, should not be thus fooled. She does not yield eagerly or precipitately, but when she does yield, deceived by ‘sleight and flattery,’ she gives love, confidence, everything save her honour. Moreover, she treats her lover very well, studiously removing all occasions of jealousy. Arcite, however, does but feign jealousy, and after a time is seen dight in the colour of another lady, who knows better how to manage him :

‘ His newē lady holdeth him so narrow  
Up by the bridle at the stavēs end,  
That every word he drad (*dreaded*) it as an arrow ;  
Her danger madē him both bow and bend,  
And as her listē, made him turn or wend ;



For she ne granted him in her living  
No gracë why that he hath lust to sing,' etc.

This is as it should be; but the turn of events affords Anelida no solace. The complaint proper, in which the forsaken maid pours forth her soliloquy of sorrow, attests profound knowledge of the human heart. The worthless character of her lover is now too apparent; but the strong tie of willing attachment cannot be snapped because the mind is enlightened. The knowledge, earlier, would have served as a check, as a warning. The tie would never have been formed. Now self-esteem, the spur of intolerable rivalry, accentuates the pang of separation. Her one wish, her one hope is that he should return to her side. It is something like the advertisements that appear in the 'agony column' of the public journals: Forgiven! The lyrical section is followed by a single stanza indicating that Chaucer proposed to resume the narrative. Finally the poem was left unfinished. The cause of the interruption is unknown; but later the material was required for the *Knight's Tale*, wherein is a portrayal of the Temple of Mars similar to that which it was obviously intended to insert here. The structure of the *Complaint*, using that term in its narrower meaning, is metrically full of interest. The earlier stanzas consist of lines of ten syllables; then follow two with lines of eight syllables; and lastly one with lines of ten syllables, but split into three parts by internal rhymes. This arrangement, repeated in an antistrophe, must not be regarded as purely fanciful. The change to shorter measures denotes more eager feeling, swifter motion of soul, until in the final stanza is attained a veritable prestissimo of passion.

The series is completed by the *Complaint of Venus*, which, however, is regarded as much later, possibly as



late as 1393. Formerly it was treated as the complement of the *Complaint of Mars*, and the two lyrics were printed together as parts of one whole. Even to-day it is hard to escape the conviction that Chaucer designed some connexion between the poems, and a natural, though by no means certain, explanation is that the *Complaint of Venus* is a palinode, written, or rather translated, when my lady of York had amended her manners. At any rate, as we pass from the *Complaint of Mars* to the *Complaint of Venus*, there is a sensible change of tone. Morally, the latter is quite inoffensive. Instead of dealing with the excitements of animal passion, it dilates with delicacy on the pains and satisfactions of a love that may be pure and platonic. The lover is admirable, not for charms of person, but for charms of character. For this alteration Sir Oto de Granson, a Savoyard, is mainly responsible, since he it was who first indited the *Complaint*, but Chaucer adopted both style and sentiment. That he had a special purpose in view may perhaps be inferred from the fatigue to which he confesses. To match Granson's rhymes and at the same time preserve his phrases was no easy task, and, moreover, he was growing old. Supposing 1393—in which year Granson received a pension from Richard II.—to be the date of the translation, Chaucer, according to the common reckoning, would have been past fifty. 'Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster,' did not reach sixty, so that, in those hard times, the expectation of life was less than at present. That Chaucer should have exerted himself to please the gracious princess in physical weakness was surely to enhance the compliment and render the apology—if apology it were—more deeply and intelligibly sincere.

What has been said concerning the *Complaint of Venus*

is a digression, though, as will be admitted, a necessary digression. The work next in succession to *Anelida and Arcite* appears to have been the *Parliament of Fowls*, which, as an occasional or 'topical' poem, is comparable with the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Complaint of Mars*. Here, also, Chaucer has sedulously concealed the 'inwardness' of the parable, somewhat in the manner of those ingenious advertisers who invite you to discover in the mazes of a landscape a cow or a human head. Almost certainly there was little difficulty at the time, but the lapse of centuries tended to make matters more obscure. Many a wild conjecture was hazarded, until, not very long ago, Dr. Koch succeeded in unravelling the mystery. Once more it is a Court episode that has engaged Chaucer's pains, and the magazine of Froissart's Chronicles has been made to furnish all we need to know regarding the prose of the affair. It was mostly prose. 'No, Dudley,' says Elizabeth in *Kenilworth*, 'ties that make the lowly maiden happy are denied to her sovereign.' Slightly modified, the sentiment might have suited Anne of Bohemia, who, after being betrothed to a prince of Bavaria and a margrave of Misnia, was finally wedded to young Richard of England. It took a year's tedious negotiations to settle the point; the wooing was done by specially appointed ambassadors; and all the while the future of the parties hung in the balances of policy. No doubt the conditions might be paralleled in less exalted spheres—they are even usual in France—but it is certain that they were far removed from the state of nature portrayed in the poem, wherein the 'formel' eagle—that indescribably puzzling term, which, however, in sound and sense, is nearly equivalent to 'female'—exercises her right of choice, dismissing two 'tercels,' and leaving the royal eagle in sus-

pense as to her ultimate decision. It is fair to suppose that the poem was written or published soon after the new queen's arrival in 1382, by which time it might be observed of the suit, 'All's well that ends well.'

In the course of the allegory Chaucer remarks :

'Out of oldē fields, as man saith,  
Cometh all this new corn from year to year,  
And out of oldē bookēs, in good faith,  
Cometh all this new science that men lear(n).'

This, as we have seen, was no pious opinion, nor was it a novel principle, but one he consistently followed. It receives fresh illustration in the *Parliament of Fowls*. For the title, as for much else in the work, Chaucer was beholden to 'Aleyn' (Alanus de Insulis) and his *Pleynt of Kynde* (*Planctus Naturae*), and he alludes in the text to both writer and writing. Only, the birds that for 'Aleyn' are merely dead ornaments of Nature's dress—figured work—start, in the *Parliament*, into exuberant life. They are habitants of an earthly paradise, where they disport themselves under the high tutelage of the goddess herself. However, Chaucer is not content to improve on Alanus by a happy readjustment. He lays Cicero, and Dante, and Boccaccio, and the *Romance of the Rose* under contribution, using their phrases and descriptions as bricks wherewith to build up the fabric of imagination, which pregnant touches of his own wit and wisdom cement. The architecture or 'machinery' of the poem bears close resemblance to that of the *Book of the Duchess*.

Chaucer begins by disclaiming all knowledge of love at first hand, thus aiding our previous contention that no reliance can be placed on formal statements in relation to this alluring topic. Whatever knowledge he possesses is, he now avers, purely theoretical, derived from books.

However, he is not disposed to apologize on that account. He thinks highly of books, and is especially charmed with one—‘Tullius of the Dream of Scipion’—of which he proceeds to give some account. From books he passes to dreams. These he deems of no true significance, holding them, in fact, a mere hash-up of waking experiences, hopes, and aspirations :

‘The weary hunter, sleeping in his bed,  
To wood again his mindē go’th anon ;  
The Judgē dreameth how his pleas be sped ;  
The carter dreameth how his cartēs gon ;  
The rich of gold ; the knight fight(s) with his foen,  
The sickē met (*dreams*) he drinketh of the tun ;  
The lover met he hath his lady won.’

He thus paves the way for the recital of a wondrous vision fallen to him, by taking care to show that the poem is the result of chance, not of calculation. Having relieved himself of the suspicion of self-interest or a wish to flatter great personages, Chaucer plunges into the main theme. Just as in the *Comedy* Virgil escorts the strange Florentine through realms of the lost, so Scipio Africanus, or his shade, conducts the English poet to a spacious and beautiful park. Chaucer parodies the inscription over Hell-gate ; but, as glory of earth and horrors of the abyss are evidently incongruous, he turns elsewhere for models of description. Boccaccio’s *Teseide* has been freely ‘exploited,’ and that has been eked out, though the lavish detail hardly needed it, by the *Romance of the Rose*. In all these cases, however, where Chaucer appears to lean heavily on extraneous support, there is always the personal factor. He is not such a cripple that he cannot help himself at a pinch. The truth is that during the earlier portion of his career Chaucer laboured to impart an

abstract tone to his poetry, to banish, as far as possible, suggestions of actuality, and all that was not classical or sanctioned by the best usage. This timidity, natural in a literary pioneer, as Chaucer was in England, caused him to remain long, too long, within the ring-fence of precedent. Indeed, the yearning for precedent never quite left him. This trait, however, is associated with an occasional display of independence, which proves that Chaucer's adaptations arose rather from scholarly appreciation than weakness of invention or default of observation. Thus the imaginary park may have had an English original. In an article contributed to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1882, and reprinted in *Folia Litteraria* (Seeley, 1893), Professor Hales indicates some notable contrasts between Boccaccio's picture of Mount Cithaeron—the rough model—and Chaucer's description in the *Parliament of Fowls*. The following stanza is cited from Mr. W. M. Rossetti's literal translation of those passages of the *Teseide* which bear on the subject:

'With whom going forward she saw that  
In every view suave and charming;  
In guise of a garden bosky and beautiful,  
And greenest, full of plants,  
Of fresh grass and every new flower;  
And therein rose fountains living and clear;  
And among the other plants it abounded in  
Myrtle seemed to her more than other.'

There is, it will be observed, no mention of any river. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, this feature is introduced, and we read also of fish:

'A garden saw I full of blossomed boughës  
Upon a river in a greenë mead,  
There as sweetness evermore enough is

With flowers white, blue, yellow, and red,  
And coldë wellë streamës nothing dead,  
And swimming full of smallë fishes light  
With finnës red and scalës silver bright.'

Clearly we are in not quite the same place. But this is not all. Chaucer's park is walled with green stone. Now to be encompassed with a wall, instead of pales, was in some sort characteristic of Woodstock Park, at any rate in the opinion of John Rous, of Warwick, which Fuller records. In 1411 Woodstock Park became the property of Thomas Chaucer, whom we now know to have been Geoffrey's son or, perhaps, stepson. Assuming that the poet had this park more or less in mind, the river would have been the Glyme, which, however, in modern times has been diverted from its ancient course by 'Capability Brown.' It may be added that originally the wall was built by Henry I. for the custody of a menagerie.

If Chaucer was idealizing Woodstock, it is probable that he had some motive in the background. It can scarcely be that Woodstock was for any long time his abode, but the place may have had associations he took this opportunity to revive. That was Chaucer's way; and who shall say what allusions the poem may not enshrine? Apparently, however, the point is not approached until the effort is already half-spent. Then birds of all kinds are shown repairing to an *al fresco* matrimonial 'change. It is St. Valentine's Day, and the feathered candidates make it their 'busy care' to mate. The main interest centres in a lady-eagle, whom Nature, throned on a flowery hill, holds on her hand, and her suitors three. The cuckoo, the duck, etc., are vulgar creatures, whose idle chatter the goddess represses; and it is pretty evident that they are introduced as foils to the refined 'tercel' and even more refined 'formel' eagle, as far above them in quality as, in human

society, are kings and queens above proletariat. It is of men and women, however, not of birds, that Chaucer is thinking. The duck swears by his hat! It is needless to labour the point. The murder is out; and King Richard and his bride must have been hard to please if they did not accept in good part this elaborate compliment, all the more telling because bliss is, in the poem, as yet unachieved. Chaucer was, of course, not the first to use birds as mouthpieces of human sentiment. Aristophanes' play is a notable anticipation. But Chaucer could not have known Greek, and the idea was probably derived from the *volucraires* of old French literature.

Chaucer nowhere deems it requisite to excuse his ignorance of Greek, and certainly it never prevented him from venturing upon Greek themes. The *Teseide* did very well as a substitute for the literature of Hellas; but Chaucer, for some reason, was shy of confessing his obligations, though neither small nor few. Dante he mentions, Petrarch he mentions; but, if Boccaccio chances to be his authority, he makes believe to have borrowed from the Latin, and, to be precise, from one Lollius, a writer of whose productions nothing is known, and whose fame depends on a miscopied or mistranslated passage of Horace. Despite these subterfuges, the basis of Chaucer's

most ambitious love-poem—his *Troilus and Cressida*—is unquestionably Boccaccio's *Filosttrato*. At the same time, it must be con-

ceded that the Italian epic, though the chief element, is yet only an element in a composition which has many claims to originality. Comparison of the poems reveals the fact that Chaucer's paraphrase is quite unscrupulous. Sometimes he adheres to his text, giving stanza for stanza. Sometimes he expands one stanza of Boccaccio's into, perhaps, five. Sometimes he breaks entirely away from



his model, and inserts whole passages for which it is vain to look in the *Filostrato*. *Troilus and Cressida* is nearly half as long again as the *Filostrato*. The numerical test, however, is not quite satisfactory, nor is it the case that, whatever Chaucer did not borrow from Boccaccio, was inde-feasibly his own. For example, he copies a famous saying of Dante regarding the bitter woe of remembering happy times in wretchedness. But Chaucer's own interpolations are often excellent and of the highest poetical effect. The simile of 'proud Bayard' is one of the sort. The young knight, who piques himself on his freedom from the trammels of love, is likened to a spirited horse :

'As proude Bayard 'ginneth for to skip  
 Out of the way (so pricketh him his corn),  
 Till he a lash have of the longë whip ;  
 Then thinketh he, " Though I prance all befor  
 First in the trace, full fat and newë shorn,  
 Yet am I but an horse, and horses' law  
 I must endure, and with my feerës (*companions*) draw." '

'So fared it with this fierce and proude knight,' etc.

It is even more instructive to contemplate the general character of the transformation, for a better illustration of the difference between English and Italian poetry would be hard to find. In a definition of the deepest insight Coleridge observes that English verse, as compared with Italian, requires a denser body of thought. The *Filostrato* possesses exterior grace, but is wholly sensuous in tone, preaches no philosophy, exhibits no intimate knowledge of the human heart. Seizing on this brilliant, but empty recital, Chaucer made it serve another purpose than that of ministering light and lecherous pleasure. In order to adapt it to his ends, he reconstituted the matter—a process to which the story may be said to be accustomed.

Quite certainly not of Boccaccio's invention, it owed its being to the eclipse of Homer, who, during the Dark Ages, had ceased to be read. True, in this very poem Chaucer cites 'Omer' among authorities on the Trojan War, but 'Omer,' he had certainly the best of reasons for knowing, was inaccessible. The *Iliad* dismisses his hero with bare mention. The *Æneid* assigns three lines to Troilus, and Dares, of unjust celebrity, is not specially concerned for him. Benoît de Sainte-More, in his romance, first brought Troilus into prominence. It is in connection with Cressida, however, that the development of the story can best be traced. Ultimately, she is Briseis. The first book of the *Iliad* describes the events succeeding the capture of two fair-cheeked Trojan girls. At first the booty of Achilles, Briseis is afterwards taken from him by his superior, Agamemnon. Incensed at the loss, the warrior sulks in his tents, going no more to counsel or to battle. In the *Iliad* the girl's predicament is humiliating, and Homer does not seek to arouse sympathy for her. She is 'fair-cheeked'—that is all. Dares adds some particulars, but Benoît de Sainte-More invests her with a personality and a part.

The significance of the poem lies not in the treachery of Cressida, but in the hardness of fate. Chaucer cannot find it in his heart to excuse Cressida, although she is evidently a favourite with him; but he is careful to explain that he intends no reflexions on her sex, which has often the greatest reason to complain of faithlessness in men. Here he parts company with Boccaccio, to whom the fickleness of woman is the marrow, as it is the moral, of the story. In Chaucer's poem the moral is different, and, having regard to the style of the narrative, less obvious. Towards the conclusion he becomes unaccountably pious, and preaches on the text—'Set your affections on things above':

‘O youngē freshē folkēs, he or she,  
 In which that love upgroweth with your age,  
 Repaireth <sup>1</sup> home from worldly vanity,  
 And of your heart upcasteth the vis<sup>a</sup>,<sub>ge</sub>  
 To thilkē God that, after his imàge  
 You made, and thinketh all n’ is (*is not*) but a fair,  
 This world that passeth soon, as flowers fair.

‘And loveth Him, the which that right for love,  
 Upon a cross our souiēs for to buy,  
 First starf (*died*) and rose, and sit(s) in Heaven above,  
 For He n’ ill (*will not*) falsen no wight, dare I say,  
 That will his heart all wholly on Him lay;  
 And since He best to love is, and most meek,  
 What needeth feigned lovēs for to seek?’

It has been said that Chaucer becomes unaccountably pious, and that is true in the sense that scenes of amorous delight and blind vengeance, sympathetically drawn, do not prepare for an edifying homily. It seems tolerably clear, however, that the study of the *Paradiso* had a chastening effect on Chaucer, and led him to ask himself, much as Herbert did:

‘Doth poetry  
 Wear Venus’ livery? Only serve her turn?  
 . . . . . Cannot Thy Dove  
 Outstrip their Cupid easily in flight?’

The result is that Chaucer performs an unexpected summer-sault, dedicates his poem, not humorously, to the ‘moral Gower’ and ‘philosophical Strode,’ and closes with a translation of Dante’s invocation of the Trinity.

Comparing *Troilus and Cressida* with the *Filostrato*, we find, as one of the differences, that the former contains many invocations—a kind of literary etiquette, which Boccaccio, who invokes only Fiammetta, seems to have

<sup>1</sup> Middle English form of the imperative.

judged superfluous. We can hardly err in attributing this also to the influence of Dante. In the third book of the *Paradiso* occurs an invocation of Apollo; in the third book of the *House of Fame* there is an invocation of the 'god of science and of light,' and in nearly the same terms. Now *Troilus and Cressida* enshrines what Ten Brink interprets as prophecy of the *House of Fame*, then perhaps already begun. The passage is part of the stanza in which Chaucer bids godspeed to his poem :

'Go, little book ; go, little mine tragedy !  
There God, my Maker, yet that ere I die,  
God send me might to make some comedy.'

The *Comedy* is, of course, the title of Dante's supreme achievement, and, as Chaucer was finishing a variation of Boccaccio's epic with Dante's *terzines* ringing in his ear, it is natural to surmise, however indiscreet we may think it, that he contemplated a similar step in relation to the great masterpiece.

In enumerating Chaucer's works, Lydgate affirms :

'He wrote also full many a day agone  
*Dante in English*, himself doth so express.'

Chaucer does not go quite as far as that in the way of acknowledgment—at least, in the *House of Fame* or any existing subsequent poem; and, unless Lydgate was in possession of a poem, or letter, or tag of table-talk no longer open to verification, the disciple's memory must have played him false. However, as Rambeau has shown,

*The House of Fame.* Dante's *Comedy* has supplied Chaucer with almost everything in the *House of Fame* that is vital. Chaucer's intention was not so serious as Dante's, but it was serious enough to prevent parody. Otherwise the many resemblances, com-

bined with the vein of humour which breaks out, for instance, in his declining with thanks the erudite eagle's offer to teach him astronomy, might almost justify the description. The true mode of regarding the *House of Fame* is to think of it as picturing, in allegorical form, Chaucer's personal plight. Dante, when he wrote the *Divine Comedy*, had done with mundane affairs. His outlook was, not on this world, but on the world beyond. Chaucer, however, was still in mid-career. The *House of Fame* was at once a philosophic study of his individual case and a skilfully contrived appeal to his earthly Jove for consideration. We know that this was not his first use of *double entendre*, and it says much for Chaucer's delicate tact that, as in the past, so now allusion sufficed, and he was soon in the enjoyment of a comfortable sinecure.

While, however, his poetry subserves practical ends, Chaucer was not the slave of 'business.' A work like the *House of Fame* was an end in itself. Its author hated figures, but loved poetical composition, loved books, and indulged these tastes at the risk of injuring his sight. For what ultimate profit? There, in that question, is the subject of the *House of Fame*. If he is expending these immense pains in the hope of achieving immortality, then Chaucer makes it evident to himself, and to others, that it is a very uncertain investment. He does not arrive at the unwelcome truth at once or intuitively. He finds it out in the course of a pilgrimage to the abode of the goddess, on whose knees the decision rests.

The poem opens with a dissertation on dreams. There are various ways of accounting for them, but, not as on a former occasion, Chaucer refuses to commit himself:

'Well worthë of this thing great clerks.'

And Chaucer was, if not a great clerk, a wise man.

The poet then proceeds to invoke the God of Sleep, that he may tell his dream aright—all in a very leisurely fashion, which is indeed characteristic of Chaucer, and but for his sweet verse and genial temper might be qualified by a harsh name. After the twofold introduction, he narrates the dream. 'Twas on the 10th of December—the year is not stated—that Chaucer fell asleep and dreamed of a marvellous temple of glass, wherein were images of gold, and tabernacles, and pinnacles, dight with precious stones. The dreamer cannot tell where he is, but was quite convinced that the building was the Temple of Venus, being led to that conclusion by certain symbols—her figure 'naked fleeting in a sea,' her garland of red and white roses, her comb, her doves, her blind son Dan Cupido, and brown-faced Vulcano, who, though Chaucer does not refer to the fact, is her unlucky husband. Roaming up and down in this place, he lights on a brazen table affixed to the wall, and inscribed with the lines:

‘ I will now sing if that I can,  
The armës, and also the man,  
That first came through his destiny,  
Fugitive of Troy country,  
In Itaile with full muchë pine (*pain*)  
Unto the strandës of Lavine.’

The purpose of this inscription, apparently, was to serve as a key or reminder to those who, like Chaucer, had read their Virgil, and, with the help of the *Æneid*, could decipher the meaning of the rich sculptures with which the ‘church’—Chaucer again is guilty of anachronisms—was decorated. The residue of the book is mainly a summary of the Latin epic divided into scenes. When the poet has sated his eyes on the graven images, he desires to know where he is, and accordingly passes out through the wicket, in the hope that he may descry some man stirring,

who will tell him. He sees, however, a wide wilderness—no town, nor house, nor tree, nor bush, nor grass, nor ploughed land; nothing but sand. Then his heart fails him, and he prays to Christ in bliss to save him from phantom and illusion. At last he is ware of an eagle fast by the sun, and high in air as his eye can pierce—a very wonderful eagle, unlike any mortals had ever seen, with feathers of shining gold; and the eagle slowly descends earthwards. With this the first book concludes.

In a second proem Chaucer craves fresh inspiration from ‘Cipris’ (commonly called Venus) and an abstraction, Thought, and then resumes his narrative. The eagle pounces on the poet, as he flees, and in his stark claws, lightly as if he were a lark, carries him right up into the firmament. The poor man is cold with fear, and proves a troublesome burden; but the eagle assures him that no harm is intended, and that the rude seizure is for his instruction and profit. Jove does not propose to make a star of him as yet. In fact, the god designs for Chaucer a little holiday as recompense for labour and devotion in the service of Cupid. The well-inclined eagle sketches for his charge, and for all whom it may concern, the monotonous round to which the poet is condemned. He tells him Jove considers:

. . . ‘That thou hast no tidings  
Of Lovës folk, if they be glad,  
Nor of nought ellës that God made;  
And not only from far country  
That there no tiding com’th to thee,  
But of thy very neighëbours,  
That dwellen almost at thy doors,  
Thou hearest neither that nor this;  
For when thy labour done all is,  
And hast made all thy reckonings,  
Instead of rest and newë things,



Thou go'st home to thy house anon ;  
 And, also (*as*) dumb as any stone,  
 Thou sittest at another book,  
 Till fully dazed is thy look,  
 And livest thus as an hermit  
 Although thine abstinence is lit (*little*).'

These and the following lines are a gloss on the first book. Just as in the introductory canto of the *Comedy* Dante pictures his miserable and forlorn lot as the valley of the shadow of death, so Chaucer, borrowing perhaps from other cantos, symbolizes the tedium of engrossing official toil by a wilderness. But in the midst of the wilderness is a beautiful edifice—Chaucer's ideal world, which would be well enough were it not so unsubstantial. The temple is of glass; and, further, it is void of companionship. There is no Beatrice, no Laura within; the loves of Dido and Æneas are typical of nearly all he celebrates. He feels himself at once a servant and a spectator, and sick of either rôle. Then appears the eagle, despatched by the compassionate god to show him the kingdoms of earth and sky, and the glory of them. Whilst Chaucer is voyaging through the air, a passage of Boethius occurs to his mind:

. . . 'A thought may flee so high  
 With feathers of philosophy  
 To passen every element.'

The eagle's golden plumes and the feathers of Philosophy are doubtless the same; for, if ever there was a philosopher-eagle, it was Chaucer's. He pours into the poet's ear more information than the latter finds acceptable; the pendent pilgrim is 'button-holed' by a portentous bore. One point on which the eagle insists is that everything has its natural sphere, to which it inevitably tends. As

rivers seek the sea, so all sounds travel to the House of Fame. But they are not borne thither merely as echoes. In the case of articulate speech, they are visible, as well as audible witnesses, for or against the speaker, whose form they assume. With this lesson in mythology the eagle takes his leave. He has landed the poet safely on the far terrain, but is forbidden to linger, and Chaucer continues his journey alone. He begins to climb a high rock, higher than any in Spain, and forthwith the nature of this rock engages his attention. At first it seems crystalline, but, on closer inspection, he discovers that it is of ice. In the ice are graven the names of many famous people; but the inscriptions are being gradually 'thawed off,' and of every name one or two letters are molten away, so that spelling is difficult. Northwards, however, the shadow of a castle conserves the fame even of old-time worthies. This is part and parcel of the tyranny and caprice which rule in Fame's domain and render it as much a charnel-house as Valhalla.

However, the palace is of a peerless and ineffable beauty. It is built throughout—castle and hall, tower and bower—of beryl, and seemingly in one piece. The names are so many in number as to resemble snow-flakes. In the pinnacles are niches where stand minstrels and jesters telling stories both merry and sad. But it were idle here to attempt an account of the wonders of the place. The presiding genius is the goddess Fame, who occupies a 'seat imperial,' and around whose throne the muse Calliope and her sisters sing eternally. Whilst Chaucer gazes on the witching scenes, great companies of folk enter in succession and implore the 'feminine' creature to grant their request. Fame does as she pleases about that. To some who claim good report as guerdon of their good works she is unmerciful, commanding Æolus to blow his trump

Slander as signal of evil speaking. To others she is kind, and for them the rival trump Clear Laud breathes balm and roses.

Although Chaucer recounts these episodes in detail, and with an appearance of interest, they were not precisely what he had come to see. He turned about, when one that stood behind addressed him kindly and inquired his name and errand. Is it to obtain fame that he has come? Chaucer scouts the notion. His object is not to be remembered in death, but to hear tidings of the living. His new-found friend—an emissary of Jupiter, as it turns out—conducts him to the *domus Daedali* or Labyrinth, a fabric of wickerwork, which stands in an adjacent valley, and is a vast mart of the world's news. The House of Rumour, though sixty miles long, is so crowded that Chaucer has scarce standing-room. Amongst the 'congregation' are shipmen, and pilgrims, and pardoners, and couriers, who help to swell the stock of tidings, and, like the Athenians of old, 'spend their time in nothing else than to tell or hear some new thing.' Whenever any of them receives a scrap of intelligence, whether it be false or true, he always, in passing it on, garnishes it with an addition of his own, and so, like rolling snow-ball, it grows and grows until Fame finally decrees what shall become of it.

At last the poet sees a man whom he may not and cannot name, but who seems to be of great dignity. This man was probably Richard II., to whom Chaucer looked for the amelioration of his lot. He, however, tells us no more about him; and, in fact, the *House of Fame* ends with the bare suggestion of this exceptional mysterious being. The composition strikes everyone—it struck Caxton—as unfinished, and the usual explanation is that Chaucer could not hit on a suitable conclusion. Possibly his in-

spiration was spent ; possibly he did not choose to finish the poem, preferring to break off with the hint that there was one who could help him, and he would. Anyhow, to those who have eyes to read, the purpose of the work is patent. Rather than wait for the insecure paradise of posthumous renown he wished to live his life. For him this lying and backbiting world is a source of infinite entertainment ; but whilst he is tied to his desk, society and study are incompatible ideals.

In February, 1385, Chaucer was allowed to exercise his office of Comptroller of the Customs and Subsidies by deputy. Three years before, on being appointed Comptroller of the Petty Customs of the Port of London, he had been similarly indulged. Now, therefore, he was practically his own master, except as dependence on royal favour prescribed the direction of his poetical gifts. Although in *Troilus and Cressida* Chaucer remarks that he would 'gladlier' write of Penelope's truth and good Alcestis, it has been thought that the *Legend of Good Women* was undertaken either at the behest of Queen Anne,<sup>1</sup> or, at least, from a desire to please her. The thread of policy that mingled with the skein of Chaucer's imaginings was certainly not deficient when he set about weaving this new design. As the poem has been assigned to the years 1384-5, the prologue was perhaps already completed before February of the latter year, and may have contributed to Chaucer's release from bondage.

<sup>1</sup> In the prologue of the *Fall of Princes* Lydgate remarks :

'This poet wrote, at the request of the queen,  
A Legendē, of perfect holiness,  
Of Good Women.'

Professor Skeat discredits this statement. Had it been the fact, he believes Chaucer would have mentioned it.

The composition of the *Legend of Good Women* Chaucer represents as in the nature of penance or reparation for past errors. We have seen how it was his wont to regard himself as a servant of Love. In the prologue of this poem his master appears and rates him soundly for indiscretions. Chaucer was kneeling by a daisy, when, he says :

‘ This God of Love on me his eyen cast,  
 And said, “ Who kneeleth there ? ” and I answer’d  
 Unto his asking, when that I it heard,  
 And said, “ It am I,” and came him near,  
 And salued (*saluted*) him. Quoth he, “ What dost thou here,  
 So nigh mine ownë flower, so boldëly ?  
 It werë better worthy truëly  
 A worm to nighen near my flower than thou.”  
 “ And why, Sir,” quoth I, “ and it likë you ? ”  
 “ For thou,” quoth he, “ art thereto nothing able.  
 It is my relic digne and délitable,  
 And thou my foe.”’ . . .

He is his foe, because he has translated the *Romance of the Rose*, which—in parts—is ‘ heresy,’ and has said of Cressida what was calculated to lessen men’s confidence in women. For thus doing the god swears by Saint Venus, his mother, he will make Chaucer an example. However, in this poem, Love has gotten him a wife who effectually intercedes for the criminal. She reminds her husband of Chaucer’s meritorious works—his *Death of Blanch*, his *Parliament of Fowls*, his *House of Fame*, etc.—and requires that his faults shall be condoned, if only he will ‘ make ’ of true women as much as he has said amiss in *Cressida* and the *Rose*. The book finished, he is to present it to the Queen, in her behalf, at Eltham or at Sheen.

This injunction clearly implies a vague identity between the Queen of Love and the Queen of England—a charac-

teristic artifice not unlike the 'good fair White.' The charming lady, however, unites in her person two other identities. Chaucer has not proceeded far with the poem before he makes a confession of faith—taught him perhaps by Froissart—and gives expression to much tender religious sentiment anent 'those flowers, white and red, which men call daisies in their town.' On the 1st of May, ere it is day, he rises 'with dreadful heart and glad devotion' to be present at the resurrection of this flower, and remains kneeling till it unfolds. All day long Chaucer tarries in the company of his 'emperice,' listening to the notes of the small birds. Then the sun fares to the west, the daisy shuts, and the poet speeds home to his house. His flower-strown couch is in a little arbour, and within an hour or two he falls asleep—of course, to dream. Morpheus waves his wand, and the loved flower is changed to a lovely dame.

. . . . 'From afar came walking in the mead  
The God of Love, and in his hand a queen,  
And she was clad in royal habit green;  
A fret of gold she haddë next her hair,  
And upon that a white corowne she bare.'

The dream-lady is, of course, the flower of Chaucer's worship. She is also an old-time heroine—'Alcestis, whilom Queen of Thrace,' as she describes herself. She might have added that, before supplanting Psyche in the affections of Eros, she had figured in history as the spouse of Admetus, and that her courage and devotion had been lauded in a famous play of Euripides called by her name. Now Chaucer has wedded her to Love, who, at the close of the prologue, illumines the poet regarding several points in her character—causing the subject to blush—and gives him particular directions what to do, in order that the renown of 'good Alceste' may transcend that of all his

other saints. The god's instruction and the poet's purpose were to make the *Legend* a sort of stairway or pyramid, and the intermediate lays were to lead up to a grand climax wherein Alcestis was to reappear in all the splendour of her wifely attributes.

Chaucer speaks of nineteen elect ladies, whose virtues he intended to hymn, but his mind seems to have been somewhat befogged both as to those about whom he designed to write, and, afterwards, as to those about whom he actually had written. The god avers that the names are discoverable in Chaucer's ballade (included in the prologue), as no doubt some of them were; but Absolom, despite his tresses, and Jonathan, despite his love 'passing the love of women,' were hardly eligible as topics of the *Legend*, whatever might be said for Esther and Isolt, and we cannot think that Chaucer would have shut them out from a sense of temporal incongruity. However, in the introduction to the prologue of the *Man of Law's Tale* is given another list, wherein the poet takes to himself credit for sundry tales, which, if he began, he never completed. These two lists do not correspond, and attempts to harmonize them are but labour lost. The fact is, Chaucer's literary affairs, as will be seen more clearly in relation to the *Canterbury Tales*, were allowed to drift into inextricable confusion. Many of his works were left unfinished, which must mean that, before he had done with one poem, he was busy with another, and he had a habit, illustrated in the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, of revising a particular portion while much that remained was not even sketched. Thus, instead of twenty lays and a prologue, Chaucer only accomplished a most charming prologue of rich and exquisite fancy, and nine lays, all good, but of somewhat varying merit. Rather oddly, the god is precise on the point that his penitent servant shall



commence with Cleopatra, who to many does not appear a good woman, and accordingly Cleopatra leads. She is succeeded by Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Lucretia, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, and Hypermnestra.

Ovid's *Heroides* are in the form, not of stories, but of epistles, so it is perhaps doubtful whether the conception of the poem came originally from the classic verse or from Boccaccio's prose treatise *De Claris Mulieribus*. As regards the matter, Chaucer's authorities are legion, including Virgil, Livy, Florus, Guido da Colonna, and others. It is curious that in one or two instances the manuscripts disagree, some having 'Ovid,' where others read 'Guido.' The latter is correct as to the fact—that is, Guido was the source—but it may be that, as in the case of the *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer did not choose to admit his obligation. There never was an author who, in this matter of acknowledgment, was more capricious, more a law unto himself. In his *Hypsipyle and Medea* he shows that he is acquainted with some version of Guido, but that he is acquainted with Ovid as well:

‘All be this not rehearsed in Guidò,  
Yet saith Ovid in his Epistles so.’

He is, in fact, not only willing, but eager to own himself Ovid's follower, even where his narration is based—say—on Livy. This seems to indicate, though Guido favoured Latin, the wane of Italian influence. Not, however, its total eclipse. The prologue cites Dante, and Chaucer's knowledge of Agatho, to whose invention he boldly attributes the 'stellification' of Alcestis, is supposed to have been derived from the *Purgatorio*. The spelling 'Agaton' appears to betray the source, though Chaucer may have been acquainted with Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, in which mention is made of both Agatho and Alcestis. Probably,

however, Chaucer owed more to confused remembrance of Froissart's *Dittié de la Flour de la Margherite* than to any other writing, whether ancient or modern. There are a few more reminiscences of his Italian authors, but, on the whole, it is Ovid, not Dante, that commands his observance. Ovid was a child of this world, who had no need to clear his mind of platonic cant; and so, with his bevy of ladies, he was fit escort for Chaucer in his descent from the perilous height of the *House of Fame* to the motley group of the Tabard.

The tales of the *Legend* are told with insinuating ease, with a freshness that has in it not a particle of affectation. From time to time Chaucer takes you into his confidence, and tells you what he omits and why. His manner is so intimate and persuasive that, by a sort of necessity, he carries you along with him.

'The wedding and the feastë to devise,  
To me that have y-taken such emprise  
Of so many a story for to make  
It were too long, lest that I shouldë slake (*fail*)  
Of thing that beareth more effect and charge;  
For men may overlade a ship or barge;  
And forthy to the effect then will I skip  
And all the remnant, I will let it slip.'

Chaucer indeed never quite forgets himself or his readers. Thus, having dealt respectfully with Cleopatra and her tragic story, he indulges in the humorous comment:

'Now, ere I find a man so true and stable,  
And will for love his death so freely take,  
I pray God let our headës never ache.'

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE CANTERBURY TALES.

IN his *Life of Chaucer* the late Dr. Richard Morris observes: 'To add to his trouble his wife died in When? 1387; yet in 1388 he made his merry Canterbury pilgrimage.' Many have supposed that Chaucer's wedlock was not a source of happiness; but it is not necessary to believe that he celebrated the event by a pilgrimage sad or merry. It is indeed only an assumption, though a very probable one, that he went to Canterbury in the manner he describes on any *special* occasion, but clearly he was well acquainted with the route and the sorts and conditions of people that thronged to the shrine of Becket. The chief reasons for assuming that he accomplished the journey at a set time, and perhaps for the set purpose of acquiring material for his muse, is that he figures personally in the *Canterbury Tales*, and that there are a multitude of time-notes indicating the progress of the journey. These time-notes have naturally attracted attention, and attempts have been made, by means of astronomical calculation, to fix the precise dates on which he went and returned.

Travelling in the fourteenth century was a very different matter from what it is to-day. The roads were bad, and infested with banditti. Thus travellers were compelled to keep together for mutual protection; and when some of them were poor riders and others poorly mounted, the

movements of the party were correspondingly slow. On the whole, it seems probable that fifteen miles a day would be fair allowance for people travelling, as were the pilgrims, for pleasure. According to this computation, the Canterbury pilgrimage occupied four days in going and four in returning—a conclusion to which the time-notes already referred to lend some support. It seems fairly evident that the pilgrims met at the Tabard on the 16th of April, started on their journey on the following day, and reached Canterbury on the afternoon of the 20th. In what year? A learned German professor, Dr. Koch of Berlin, claims to have solved this problem by an astronomical test. In the prologue of the *Parson's Tale* we find it stated :

‘ Therewith the moon’s exaltation,  
I mean Libra, alway gan ascend.’

There is a good reason to suspect either that these lines are corrupt, or that Chaucer has confused his astronomy, since it is impossible, by a natural interpretation, to derive any meaning, in this context, from the words ‘moon’s exaltation,’ which was a technical expression. \* Instead of ‘I’ there is another reading, ‘in.’ If we explain that the moon rose at four o’clock p.m. in the middle of Libra, we have a distinct clue, for the day was the 20th of April. Taking the last decades of the fourteenth century, Dr. Koch assures us that the conditions are fulfilled only in the year 1385. His arguments, however, depending as they do on a forced construction of the very significant term ‘exaltation,’ are by no means conclusive, and Professor Skeat is disposed to select as a more probable date the year 1387, when April 17th fell on a Wednesday, leaving four clear week-days for the pilgrimage.

If the exact year in which Chaucer accomplished this

journey were something more than an object of proper curiosity, the quality of the evidence would be most disappointing. When, however, it is considered that the pilgrimage and its incidents concern only portions of the work—the general prologue and the connecting links, not all of which have been inserted—it becomes evident that this element might have been supplied at any stage in the execution of the project. It would almost seem as if the scheme were an ingenious contrivance for disposing of sundry pieces lying unpublished, which were now touched up and assigned to different narrators. At any rate Dr. Morris is not far out in saying that the great work ‘was written at different times of his life, from 1373 to 1400, and prefaced by a prologue written on or about a journey,’ not perhaps ‘in 1388,’ but at some intermediate date. As in February, 1385, Chaucer was released from the active duties of his Comptrollership, it were pleasant to imagine that he celebrated his manumission by a pilgrimage—a merry pilgrimage—to Canterbury in the April of that year.

It has been generally assumed that Chaucer was greatly influenced in the shaping of his work by Inspiration. Boccaccio's example, and it is hard to believe that this was totally without effect. On the other hand, the English poet drew nothing directly, and little indirectly, from the *Decameron*, which, perhaps, he knew only by repute. Where the same stories are dealt with, it is incontestable that Chaucer was indebted either to Petrarch or to French sources. A work which may have served him, to some extent, as model is the *Disciplina Clericalis* of the Spanish Jew, Petrus Alphonsus, of which he may have made the acquaintance either in the original Latin or in the French version entitled *Le Castoiment ou Instruction d'un Père à son Fils*. (The non-

chivalric character of this collection of tales may account for the popular elements in the *Canterbury* series.)

Chaucer's work, however, is individual in the sense that it is strongly dramatic. His compositions had always betrayed this tendency, but in the *Canterbury Tales* a microcosm of the age, it asserts itself as never before. There are scenery and costume, dialogue and action, and a stageful of contrasting personages. All is natural and vivid.

'It was a part of the author's plan,' says Mr. Marsh, 'to allow his personages to bring out their special traits of character, and thus to depict and individualize themselves, in the interludes between the tales. The selection of the pilgrims is evidently made with reference to this object of development in action, and therefore constitutes an essential feature of the plot. We have persons of all the ranks not too far removed from each other by artificial distinctions to be supposed capable of associating upon that footing of temporary equality which is the law of good fellowship among travellers bound on the same journey and accidentally brought together. All the great classes of English humanity are thus represented, and opportunity is given for the display of the harmonies and jealousies which now united, now divided, the interests of different orders and different vocations in the commonwealth.'

Thus we do not meet with a king or a queen, an earl or a bishop, in the motley group assembled in the hospitable Tabard, nor is the beggar found there; but, apart from these social extremes, wellnigh all England gathers beneath its roof in the persons of typical representatives. The most eminent among them was a knight, fresh from his travels, a good soldier but not a gay. Though he had been in fifteen desperate battles, he was as meek as a maid.

and wise to boot. With him was his son, a young squire, a dandy in short gown with long, wide sleeves, but all the same a perfect specimen of a youthful gentleman, strong of body and courteous of speech, who had fought in Flanders, Artois, and Picardy, and so far had not disgraced his birth or lessened his chance of winning fair lady's favour. The knight's following consisted of a single yeoman, as 'compleat' in his way as his two masters. Clad in coat and hood of green, Chaucer suspected him of being a forester. Under his belt was a sheaf of bright keen arrows, and in his hand he bare a mighty bow. From quite another quarter came a high-bred, but quiet and simple-hearted prioress, one Madame Englantine, who had never been out of England and spoke French in the Anglo-Norman dialect. She was accompanied by small dogs, and cried if any of them were smitten. As human attendants she had a nun, who was her chaplain, and three priests. Next we have a monk, fond of hunting and, in latter-day phrase, 'up-to-date.' Finding the rule of St. Maure or St. Bennet somewhat irksome, he 'let old things pass, and held after the new world.' Instead of poring over books and making himself mad with study, he rode out with his swift greyhounds in chase of the hare and neglected neither person nor appetite:

‘He was a lord full fat, and in good point.’

This monk was kept in countenance by a lisping friar, who, in a somewhat lower walk of life, attained equal measure of worldly joy and contentment. He was a great adept at begging, and though a widow had not a shoe, she must needs contribute a farthing to his necessities. Friar Herbert, however, bore little resemblance to a poor scholar. On ‘love-days,’ when neighbours made up their differences under the auspices of the Church, he was like a master or



a pope, and doubtless made money out of the transactions. His semi-cope was of double worsted. The poor scholar class was represented by a clerk of Oxford, who had not yet gotten him a benefice and was almost as lean as his horse. All his speech, which was not much, regarded moral virtue. A prosperous merchant, on the other hand, with forked beard and beaver hat, talked incessantly of his gains. Nobody would have supposed for a moment that he was in debt. Another busy man, yet not so busy as he seemed, was a serjeant of law, whose knowledge of cases reached back to the time of William the Conqueror. Unlike the merchant, the lawyer is plain in his attire. He wears a medley coat (*i.e.*, of mixed stuff or colour), and silk girdle with small ornaments. In opposition to this man about town we have a franklin, or country gentleman, who often sat for his shire, and, like Sir Roger de Coverley, was great at sessions. A true son of Epicurus, it snowed meat and drink in his house, and went hard with the cook if the sauce were not poignant and sharp. Of sanguine complexion was this franklin, with beard white as a daisy. The company included also a number of citizens—a haberdasher, a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer, and an upholsterer. All five are well-to-do, and their knives, pouches, and girdles are mounted with silver. They are in a fair way, by dint of wisdom and fortune, to become aldermen, nor would their wives object to be called *madame* and to have a mantle borne for them on festival eves. Somewhat allied to these burgesses was a cook who could make blancmange with the best. Under these circumstances Chaucer deemed it a misfortune that he had a cancer on the shin. A sunburnt Westcountryman, whose home may have been at Dartmouth, and whose ship was certainly the *Maudelayne*, impressed the poet with his social qualities, but, unquestionably a pirate, many a draught of wine had

he carried off from Bordeaux while the owner slept. If he conquered in fight, he did not cumber himself with prisoners, but threw them overboard. Every haven, every creek in the German Ocean and Bay of Biscay knew he well; and, characteristically, he wore a dagger.

Gain was not a matter of indifference to the physician, who had reaped a rich harvest in the pestilence. Though his dress was crimson and blue, lined with silk, he neither ate nor spent largely. The Bible, too, he studied but little, but was marvellously proficient in surgery and physic, astronomy, and natural magic. The cause of the malady once known, he was not long in finding a remedy for his patient. It does not appear that he exercised his art on the Wife of Bath, albeit she is said to have been somewhat deaf. A cloth-maker by occupation, she wore kerchiefs of finest texture, and her hose was remarked as being of fine scarlet. Her hat was broad as a buckler. She had been married five times, was still hale and hearty, and posed as an authority on love and courtship.

One of the most satisfactory of the set is the poor parson, a man of many excellences. Holy in thought and deed, he is a faithful preacher, a diligent pastor. But his crowning merit, to which allusion is twice made, is that he puts example before precept. He does not, like some of his order, leave his flock in the care of a hireling, while he runs off to St. Paul's in quest of preferment. With him is his brother, a ploughman—*i.e.*, a small farmer, not a labourer, for he paid tithes—and a downright Christian. A hard worker and lover of peace, he is always ready to do a good turn to his neighbour. In the description of these two worthy pilgrims—pilgrims in a higher sense than most of the rest—we discern, if anywhere, the influence of Wyclif and of Langland.

From them we again descend to lower grades. The

miller is a sturdy fellow, and wins the ram at wrestling, but does not deal fairly by his customers. He steals corn and takes toll thrice over. He is an expert performer on the bagpipe, with which he plays the pilgrims out of town. The manciple also is a cheat, and a clever one. His vocation is to buy provisions for one of the Inns of Court, and though out of his thirty masters a dozen are qualified to manage the estates of any lord in England, yet this ignorant person outwits the whole of those wise and learned men. The reeve, or steward, is accomplished in the same way. He understands farming thoroughly, and there is not a herd or hind that is not afraid of him. He succeeds in amassing wealth privately, while, at the same time, he pleases his young lord, who not only thanks him for his services, but gives him a coat and hood into the bargain. No wonder if he have a good mount, a dappled gray called Scot. Worse than reeve or manciple or miller is the sompnour, or summoner, an officer of the ecclesiastical courts now known as apparitor. His exterior is as ugly as his character, of which it may be considered typical. It is not pleasant to find that all the young girls of the diocese are at the mercy of this garlanded beast. The summoner bears a 'stiff burden' to a gentle pardoner fresh from Rome, while the latter sings 'Come hither, love, to me.' To the yellow-haired ecclesiastic his voice was his fortune. He could read a lesson on history very well, but in church his favourite exercise was to sing an offertory, the preamble to a charity sermon. Like the others, the pardoner was not above cheating. He carried pig's bones in a glass case, and with these pretended relics gained more money in a country parish than fell to the priest's share in a couple of months. There were two others in the party about whom something should be said—the host, Harry Bailey, and Chaucer himself. The innkeeper was a good-

looking man, large of stature, with twinkling eyes and a bold voice, fond of a jest, and intent on entertaining the company, which was much to his liking. If he made an exception, that exception must have been Chaucer, for afterwards he rated the poet for his habit of sitting apart and looking on the ground. He hints that there is something uncanny in Chaucer's countenance, for which fault, however, the rotundity of his figure might make amends.

Just as, according to the late Poet Laureate, in the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love, so, according to Chaucer, this season of the year affected other folk with an irresistible longing to set out on pilgrimages. This mania accounts for the accidental meeting of all sorts and conditions of people at the Tabard in Southwark. Chaucer lay at the inn 'with full devout courage,' intending to journey to Canterbury, and before night no less than nine and twenty others dropped in, all inspired with the same holy purpose.<sup>1</sup> Visits to Becket's shrine were by no means universally approved. The Lollards, of course, disliked them, and Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury murdered in the Jack Straw insurrection, did not hesitate to condemn them as occasions of frivolity and disorder. On the other hand, Archbishop Thomas Arundel (if Wyclif's follower, Master William Thorpe, may be believed) was disposed to find excuses. 'I say to thee that it is right well done that pilgrims have with them both singers and also pipers, that when one of them that goeth barefoot striketh his toe upon a stone and hurteth him sore, and maketh him to

<sup>1</sup> According to his original statement, there were 'nine and twenty in a company,' but in his subsequent list he enumerates thirty-one.

bleed, it is well done that he or his fellow begin then a song or else take out of his bosom a bagpipe for to drive away with such mirth the hurt of his fellow. For with such solace the travail and weariness of pilgrims is lightly and merrily brought forth.' As we have seen, the miller had a bagpipe, which he is stated also to have used.

In the matter of amusement, however, this pilgrimage to Canterbury was something of a novelty. The host wisely observes that it is neither comfort nor mirth to ride by the way dumb as a stone. He therefore suggests as an alternative that, to shorten the journey, each of them should tell two stories on the road to Canterbury, and two more on the homeward way. The pilgrim who relates the best tales is to have a supper at the company's expense, and Bailey himself is to be the judge. The proposal meets with ready acceptance, and after a drink of wine the pilgrims retire to rest. The next day they rise early, and forthwith the plan is carried into execution. At St. Thomas a Waterings the host decides that lots shall be drawn. The knight draws the shortest, and accordingly he it is that tells the first tale. He chooses a famous story of which Chaucer had already supplied a version—the rivalry of Palamon and Arcite.

There are signs that the English writer was not entirely satisfied with Boccaccio's handling of the narrative, to which, however, he was indebted for the matter. In the *Knight's Tale* Chaucer manifests considerable independence of the *Teseide*. Only a small proportion of lines is borrowed from the Italian epic; a somewhat larger proportion is suggested by the original; but the great bulk of the composition is distinctly of Chaucer's workmanship. The metre is changed from the stanza to the long couplet; and there are alterations in the plan. A great defect in Boccaccio's epics is

*The Knight's  
Tale.*

discursiveness, lack of centrality. Chaucer noted this fault, and thus we find him omitting Theseus' conquest of Scythia and prolonged stay in that country. While the motive for banishing irrelevancy was doubtless artistic, Chaucer shows his address by attributing the curtailment to existing circumstances. The knight professes to be brief, in order to give the other candidates a chance :

‘ I will not letten eke none of this rout ;  
Let every fellow tell his tale about,  
And let see now who shall the supper win.’

After his home-coming from Scythia, Theseus captures Thebes, and amongst his spoil are two young knights, whose rich armour fails to ward off many a grievous wound. Discovered half-dead, they are sent to Athens, where the laurel-crowned victors doom them to languish evermore, without hope of ransom, in a tower. Day after day, and year after year passes, till, on a May morning, Emily, sister of the former Queen of the Amazons and sister-in-law of Theseus, is espied by the knights in prison, walking. She is a beautiful creature, fairer than lily on its stalk, and innocent as beautiful.

‘ Y-clothèd was she fresh, for to devîse :  
Her yellow hair was braided in a tress  
Behind her back, a yardē long I guess.  
And in the garden, at the sun uprist,  
She walketh up and down, and, as her list,  
She gathereth flowers, party white and red,  
To make a subtil garland for her head,  
And as an angel heavenly she sung.’

The sight breeds discord between the wretched captives, hitherto sworn brothers. Palamon claims the girl on the ground that he first descried her, but Arcite is jealous. Meanwhile there is no intimation that the lady has the



slightest knowledge of their quarrel. All this is quite different in the *Teseide*, where Emilia is conscious of her charms, and the two friends, though equally in love with her, contrive to maintain perfect amity and concord. At length, through the intercession of Pirithous, Arcite is released from prison, but on condition that, if he is caught anywhere in Theseus' dominions, his life is forfeit. This he feels to be a questionable boon, as all his thoughts are now of Emily. At length he finds absence intolerable, returns to Athens in disguise, and hires himself out to hew wood and draw water. He attracts the notice of Theseus, who promotes him to be squire of his chamber. His rival Palamon, after seven years' confinement, finally breaks out of prison, and, having stupefied the gaoler with narcotics, makes good his escape.

Again it is a May morning. Arcite rides out on his sprightly courser into a grove to make him a garland of woodbine or hawthorn leaves. He sings in loud strains a welcome to May. To this joyous fit succeeds a more sombre mood. He compares his former state as Arcite with his squiredom, his serfage as Philostrate. He then reproaches Emily for aggravating his lot with love-pains; but adds that, if he could do aught to please her, he would care nothing for his other troubles. It so happens that in the bush, unseen by Arcite, lurks Palamon, who listens to the confession, horror-stricken. He springs out of his place of concealment, and the two agree to meet in the same spot on the following day, and contend for the lady in mortal combat. As Palamon is unarmed, Arcite promises to bring harness for him, and he is as good as his word. Whilst they fight like wild boars, Theseus, who has been hunting a hart, arrives and thrusts himself between them. Palamon explains the situation, and requests that he may die the death he deserves in sight of



Emily, and that the impostor Philostrate may die with him.

Theseus is at first well disposed to accede to his petition; but the queen, and Emily, and all the ladies begin to weep and intercede. Their prayers so far prevail that the great warrior is induced to reconsider his verdict, and soon to hold out hope that one or other of the combatants may yet attain his desire. He proposes that, instead of continuing this useless strife, each shall go where he lists, and return, after fifty weeks, attended by a hundred knights. Theseus undertakes to order a grand tournament, and the winner in this battle is to wed Emily. The rivals return at the time appointed. Each is supported by distinguished and formidable seconders, Palamon by Lygurge, great King of Thrace, who, like a griffin, looked about; Arcite by great Emetreus, King of Ind, whose voice was as a trump thundering. Neither, however, is content with mortal aid. Palamon implores the help of Venus, Arcite the countenance of Mars, and poor Emily, whose feelings have not been consulted, the succour of chaste Dian. The festival is celebrated with much splendour, and Theseus, awakened by minstrelsy, explains the conditions in his palace. The vanquished is not to be slain, but brought to a stake. The people applaud their lord's humanity, whereupon all set out for the lists. In the *mêlée*, after a stout and equal fight, in which the strong kings Emetreus and Lygurge are both dismounted, Palamon is wounded sore in his duel with Arcite by the Indian potentate, and drawn 'unvolden' to the stake. The heralds proclaim Arcite the victor, but the victory is brief and barren. Thrown from his horse in the moment of triumph by an infernal fury starting out of the ground, he is borne to Theseus' palace and laid in a bed—

‘yet in memory and alive,  
And alway crying after Emily.’

His hurt is mortal, but he is carried to church and married to his long-sought love. His jealous feelings now subside, and in a death-bed speech to his ‘sweet foe,’ he resigns her to Palamon. It is needless to trace the story further, more than to say that Palamon weds Emily, and with her lives in bliss, in riches, and in health.

The conclusion is, in some respects, unsatisfying. Palamon, it is true, has a prior right to the lady, inasmuch he was first to succumb to her charms; but, as Chaucer paints him, he is not by any means so chivalrous as his rival. When Arcite might have killed Palamon in the wood, he, like a good knight, postpones their meeting and arranges an encounter on equal terms. Yet Palamon, in the presence of Theseus, cries out for his rival’s blood. Arcite’s departure from the world also is highly becoming. It must therefore, it seems, be conceded that poetical justice is not realized in this story—only a rude substitute of the sort that often obtains in this imperfect state. Chaucer’s Palamon and Arcite are, at any rate, human and vitally unlike the marionettes that Boccaccio makes to jostle. The English poet sacrifices consistency by portraying Emily, who was, of course, an Amazon, after the best models of contemporary maidenhood; but if we speak of inconsistencies, neither the *Teseide* nor the *Knight’s Tale* will be able to stand. They are both full of anachronisms, as was the way with mediæval poems.

When the knight has ended his tale, young and old praise it as a noble story. The host next turns to the monk, desiring him to match the knight’s recital; but before he has time to reply, the drunken miller bursts in with the remark

*The Miller’s  
Tale.*

that he knows a noble tale, and declares, if he is not allowed to tell it, he will go his way. By dint of impudence he succeeds in inflicting on the party a relation of the pot-house variety; and the reeve, who follows, contributes a similar story, aimed at the race of millers. Chaucer excuses these 'churlish tales' on the score of realism:

'The miller is a churl, ye know well this,  
So was the reeve, and other many mo (*more*).'

He is bound to report their tales, but nobody is compelled to read them:

'I must rehearse  
Their wordës all, all be they better or worse,  
Or ellës falsen some of my matere.  
And therefore whoso list it not to hear,  
'Turn over the leaf, and chioose another tale;  
For he shall find enow both great and small  
Of storial thing that toucheth gentilesse,  
And eke morality and holiness.'

The *Miller's Tale* is inexpressibly coarse, but its coarseness is, in some degree, redeemed by its superabundant humour. The motive, which is the betrayal of an old man by his young wife, is repeated in the *Merchant's Tale* of January and May. The *Cook's Tale* (so-called) and the *Man of Law's Tale* have already been discussed.

We come now to that incomparable gossip, the Wife of Bath, a dame gifted with fine animal spirits, immense volubility, and hearty contempt for the rules and regulations of polite society. Her long discourse on marriage and virginity is exactly of the quality to which men like the miller and the reeve love to listen, when it comes from the lips of an experienced old woman, not at all particular in

*The Wife of Bath's  
Prologue and Tale.*

her language, and ready to support theoretical expositions by chapters of autobiography. Even those who would shun a personal interview cannot escape the attraction of the Wife of Bath's prologue. As a study of human nature, of matrimonial adventure, it forcibly appeals to all who are, or may be, involved in the situations it describes. Its utter frankness, the daring way in which it tears aside the curtain, and brings us face to face with the actualities of life, lends to it the character of a revelation. The interest turns on the Wife of Bath's confessions with regard to the five husbands she had 'at the church door.' What other relations she may have had with the male sex is left to be inferred, but this addition 'at the church door' is intended perhaps to be significant.

Alice, or Alison, began her career in wedlock at the early age of twelve. Of her five husbands, three were good, and two bad. The good partners seem to have been insipid poor thralls, unworthy of special mention, but the fourth was a challenge. He was a reveller, and kept a paramour. Alison, though not in a dishonourable sort, paid him out in his own coin :

' . . in his own grease I made him fry  
For anger and for very jealousy.  
By God ! in earth I was his purgatory,  
For which I hope his soule be in glory.'

Dwelling in the town was a bosom-friend, another Alison, to whom she betrayed her husband's confidences, and thus caused him to blush for shame. This gossip had as boarder one Jankyn, a clerk of Oxford. Now the husband spent all Lent in London, and the wife availed herself of his absence to attend vigils and processions, preachings and pilgrimages, miracle plays and marriages. She walked, also, with Dame Alison and Jankyn in the fields. Know-

ing the uncertainty of life, and that she might be left without male companionship, she flirts with the clerk and tells him that, if she were a widow, he should marry her. This, in effect, he does, and proves a very different sort of husband from any of his predecessors. He torments her by reading aloud a book of wicked wives, until she tears three leaves out of the book, and, striking the reader on the cheek, knocks him backwards into the fire. Up leaps Jankyn, like a mad lion, and hits her on the head with his fist, so that she lies, as dead, on the floor. At last, after much trouble and difficulty, they come to terms. Jankyn submits absolutely. Henceforth he is an exemplary husband, and she as kind as any wife from Denmark unto Ind.

Having regaled the company with this rather substantial *entrée*, the Wife of Bath proceeds with the next course—her tale. The choice of a story is not unsuitable, and indeed may seem to have been suggested by Alison's 'Fifth Husband' chapter, in which she deposes :

‘He was, I trowë, twenty winter old,  
And I was forty, if I shall say the sooth.’

In the tale, however, the old hag whom the knight is compelled by honour to marry is transformed into a lovely maiden. The connexion between tale and prologue becomes yet more apparent when it is observed that the pivot of the former is a riddle to the following effect: ‘What thing is it that women most desire?’ The answer is :

‘Women desire to have sovereignty  
As well over their husband as over their love,  
And for to be in mastery him above.’

The story, in fact, is a variation of Gower's tale of Florent, to which it is, on the whole, decidedly inferior. The chief

points of difference may be briefly noted. In Gower's version the scene is laid in Sicily, at some unknown period. Chaucer transfers the incidents to Britain in the time of King Arthur. In the *Confessio Amantis* the hero is charged with homicide; in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, with deflowering a virgin. Gower names the knight Florent; in Chaucer's narrative he is nameless. A ballad, however, which is founded on Chaucer's narrative, speaks of him as Gawayne. A grave fault in the Canterbury tale is occasioned by the schooling the Wife of Bath has received from the deceased Jankyn. The result is that, before the final transformation scene, the hapless knight has dinned into his ears a formidable lecture in harmony with the settled practice of the narrator, who suffered none of her husbands, save the reformed clerk, to sleep in peace. Gower escapes this temptation, and tells the tale without burdensome digression. In another direction, also, he manages better than Chaucer. The *Tale of Florent* depicts the bride-chamber as full of light, so that the knight is made to see his loathsome spouse in her nudity. The sight shocks him, and for long he cannot be induced to turn his head. By a sudden motion, however, he becomes aware that an eighteen-year-old beauty lies by his side. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale* the crone herself advertises the knight of the change, and bids him draw aside the curtain that he may verify her statement.

When the Wife had ended her prologue, the friar laughingly exclaimed that it was a long preamble, whereupon the summoner, resenting the intrusion, observed:

*The Friar's  
Tale.*

‘Lo, good men, a fly and eke a frere  
Will fall in every dish and matiere.’

The friar thereupon threatened to tell a tale of a summoner,

which should delight the whole company. At the conclusion of the Wife of Bath's story, he seizes the opportunity of exposing the base arts by which summoners terrorize people into bribes. It is a question of paying, or being haled before the ecclesiastical court on a charge of immorality. The tale describes how a summoner sets forth to extort money from a poor widow. Close by a forest he happens on a gay yeoman, with whom he enters into conversation. Finding himself in such good company, he pretends to be a bailiff:

‘He durst not for very filth and shame  
Say that he was a sompnour, for the name.’

The yeoman replies that he, too, is a bailiff, and the ‘brothers’ exchange confidences as to their methods of ekeing out their wages. ‘Always,’ says the yeoman, ‘by sleight or violence I pay my way.’ ‘Stomach or conscience know I none,’ is the summoner’s response. Thus encouraged, his new ally goes a step further:

“‘Brother,” quoth he, “wilt thou that I thee tell?  
I am a fiend, my dwelling is in hell.”’

He explains that devils are sometimes employed as God’s instruments, and cites, as a case in point, the sufferings of of the patriarch Job. The summoner, however, harbours no suspicion. By-and-by they come to a town’s end, where a cart has stuck in a deep rut. The carter cries, full of rage and vexation, ‘The Devil have all, both cart, and horse, and hay!’ The summoner jogs the fiend and bids him take the fellow at his word, but his advice is not heeded. Presently the cart is extricated from the slough, and the carter turns from cursing to blessing. ‘There,’ says the fiend, ‘it is as I told you. The carter spoke one thing and thought another.’ This generosity finds no



echo in the breast of the summoner, who bids his companion take example from him. Knocking at the widow's gate, he orders her to come out and taxes her with entertaining some friar or priest. To-morrow she must appear before the archdeacon to answer certain charges. The widow protests her inability. She has not gone so far for many a day, and has a pain in her side. The summoner then offers to compound for twelve pence, but the widow replies that she has not twelve pence at command. So it goes on, until the poor woman loses her temper and gives him to the devil. The fiend, who stands by, is disposed to oblige. 'Brother,' he says, 'be not wroth,' and therewith carries him off to a place where he will learn more secrets than a master of divinity.

The effect of this story is to make the summoner tremble with rage. After assigning in his prologue unpleasant quarters in hell to the multitudinous tribe of friars, and coining an epigram ('friars and fiends be but little asunder'), he renews the attack in a tale which, so far as these pages are concerned, must be left untold. It is a tale, not of harlotry, but of dirt.

Perusal of such a narrative raises the question, What kind of person was the lady of quality in the fourteenth century? The question is not disposed of by saddling that repulsive creature, the summoner, with the responsibility. The story no doubt reflects his character, and it is possible that those scenes in hall could never have taken place. That, however, is by no means certain, and, in any case, we must confront the fact that there were gentlewomen amongst his auditors. In the eighteenth century the fan was requisitioned when men made indelicate remarks. As they were on horseback, perhaps prioress and nun dropped to the rear. The Wife of Bath, the only other representative

of her sex, was, it is to be feared, too much in her element to adopt this salutary course.

The *Clerk of Oxenford's Tale* has already engaged attention, and the *Merchant's Tale* is a tale of harlotry. The latter, modernized by Pope under the title of *January and May*, Tyrwhitt believed to have been taken from an early fourteenth-century poem by a certain Adolphus. A more likely origin was an Italian collection of stories—the *Cento Novelle Antiche*. It is well to mention the existence of other versions, if for no other reason than that the reader may be reminded of Chaucer's 'limited liability.' Usage implies sanction, and Chaucer is not to be arraigned as though he were thrusting these 'licorous' stories for the first time on a guileless public. The next tale, that of the squire, possesses external, as well as internal, interest from the fact that Milton refers to it in *Il Penseroso* :

'Or call up him that left half told  
The story of Cambuscan bold,  
Of Camball and of Algarsife,  
And who had Canace to wife,  
That owned the virtuous ring and glass,  
And of the wondrous horse of brass  
On which the Tartar King did ride.'

Milton read so widely that it is needless to seek a special reason for the allusion. At the same time it is interesting to remember that about 1630 John Lane, a friend of his father, made an infelicitous attempt to complete the half-told story. This is merely one of the many associations which, apart from the authorship, bespeak attention for the *Squire's Tale*. As a narrative it necessarily disappoints, although signs are not wanting that, brought to its full measure, it would have been one of Chaucer's most brilliant efforts. The

atmosphere is that of the *Arabian Nights*. Chaucer himself, in the course of the story, mentions Alcen or Alhazen, an Arabian philosopher, who flourished about the eleventh century and wrote on perspective. And, as Professor Skeat has pointed out, 'the best story of the Enchanted Horse is in the *Arabian Nights*' Entertainments, where he is said to have been presented by an Indian to the King of Persia.' It seems possible, therefore, that the germ of the present story may have come from the East, with so many others, by way of Spain. On the other hand, the *Squire's Tale* contains evidence that Chaucer was not to seek in the literature of enchanted horses; and it is quite certain that the story was compounded of various elements. There can be no doubt, for instance, that Chaucer has turned to account his readings in Marco Polo. As is so often his way, he does not indicate his immediate source, but coincidences are too numerous to admit of controversy. Comparative study of the writings throws a curious light on Chaucer's erratic methods. The name Cambuscan, or Cambynskan, apparently represents Chinghis Khan, but the character is that of his grandson Kublai. Is it not singular, almost a fatality, that the two English poets—Chaucer and Coleridge—who essayed to sing this Tartar ruler, should have abandoned their task unfinished?

The opening of the story is full of promise. After reigning twenty winters Cambuscan proclaims a birthday feast, which turns out a very gorgeous affair. The third course is ended, and the king sits listening to the minstrels, when suddenly there enters at the hall door a knight on a steed of brass. In his hand is a broad mirror; on his thumb, a golden ring; by his side, a naked sword. He rides up to the high table, and, with an old-world courtesy that would have done honour to Gawayne, salutes king, and queen, and lords. The horse, the mirror, the ring, and the sword

are presents from the King of Araby and Ind ; and all are endued with magical properties. The horse can transport its rider in a vertical or horizontal direction, without injury, whithersoever the rider wills. The mirror and ring are designed for my lady Canace, Cambuscan's daughter. It is a great advantage to possess the ring, since any lady, looking therein, can discern all that is in her lover's heart, whether he be false or true, and the particulars of his treason, if any there be. The virtue of the ring is to reveal the meaning of bird-cries, and enable fair Canace to answer winged creatures in their own language. The sword can carve through any armour, and the flat of the sword is good for healing.

The arrival of these gifts causes much excitement and curiosity, and Cambuscan and his lords sit up feasting till wellnigh dayspring. Canace, on the other hand, 'full measurable, as women be,' retires to rest early, and, after dreaming of the mirror, rises early, and goes afoot into the park. The duenna, or 'mistress' (as Chaucer has it)—an old woman—is forced to rise, too, and some dozen waiting maids, five or six of whom accompany the princess. Vapour exhaling from the earth makes the sun appear ruddy and broad, but their maiden hearts are cheered by the fair sight and the music of the birds, to Canace no longer mysterious. There now follows a conversation between the king's daughter and a swooning falcon, who laments the treachery of a certain tercelet. Canace and her maids bestir themselves to comfort the poor thing, and practically that is all the fragment. If we conceived of this falcon as a simple bird, nothing could well be more insipid ; but, no doubt, as Leigh Hunt observes, she is 'a human being, in a temporary state of metempsychosis, a circumstance very common in tales of the East.' The point would have been made clear later, probably in con-

nexion with the exploits of one of the three heroes, whose perils Chaucer promises to chronicle. The breadth of the canvas, however, would seem to have led to the task being postponed until the poet's death stayed all proceedings.

(The *Franklin's* and the *Second Nun's Tale* have been already dealt with.)

The confusion attested by the unfinished condition of the *Squire's Tale* is further illustrated by *The Yeoman's Tale*. the sudden appearance of two new personages—the canon and his yeoman—at Boughton-under-Blee. This can hardly have been in accord with Chaucer's original scheme, which, as expounded in the general prologue, announces an ample number of tales—many more, indeed, than he ever lived to include. Whether, as Tyrwhitt suggests, Chaucer was induced to alter his plan by a consuming desire to attack alchemy and alchemists, is open to question. The change was more probably due to passing inspiration, and if all the pilgrims had redeemed their pledges, would have been noted as rendering the description of the journey more life-like. As things are, it is certainly awkward that an interloper should be granted the privilege of a hearing, while several members of the cast are condemned to perpetual silence. One circumstance tending to support the theory that Chaucer was influenced by some special motive is that prologue and tale combined amount to little more than endless denunciation of a frantic and dishonest pursuit. The constant stream of opprobrium, however, is natural as issuing from the mouth of a man just cured of a fatal infatuation, against which he preaches with keen intelligence, abundant knowledge, and becoming fervour. There were two sorts of alchemists—the misguided philosopher and the conscious impostor. Sometimes these characters were united in the same individuals. Like the

Jew, Zacharias Yoglan, in *Kenilworth*, they cheated poor serving-men with trash not worth a penny, while they themselves went mad after the philosopher's stone. The yeoman's master was of this type, and when he found that his assistant was about to betray his secrets, he 'fled away for very sorrow and shame.' It might be supposed that the disenchanted yeoman would improve the opportunity by retailing some choice bit of roguery perpetrated by the fugitive canon; but when, after lengthy exposure of the false art, he shows us the cursed thing in action, he expressly rejects the notion. The practitioner of whom he speaks, though belonging to the same ecclesiastical order, is a hundredfold more subtle. Told briefly, the story is as follows: A canon versed in alchemy, and thoroughly unscrupulous, visits a priest, of whom he borrows a mark. By returning the money on the third day, as agreed upon, the alchemist makes a good impression, and when he offers to afford a specimen of his skill, the priest is only too delighted. Employing merely the basest conjuring tricks, which, however, are varied on each occasion, he thrice creates the appearance of having made silver. The priest is entirely convinced, and desires to purchase the 'receipt,' which the canon sells—cheaply, as he asserts—for forty pounds. The 'receipt,' of course, is totally worthless, and the reverend cheat vanishes. It is remarkable that faith in alchemy should have survived such merciless satire; but its longevity may be attributed, in part, to the sorcery of hard words and technical terms:

‘ When we be there as we shall exercise  
Our elvish craft, we seemen wonder-wise,  
Our termès be so clerghial and so quaint.’

That the Doctor of Physic, the professor of a true and helpful science, should follow the charlatan's dupe is fitting

enough, and in accord with the pendulum arrangement found elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*.  
*The Doctor of Physic's Tale.* What strikes one as strange is the selection of the story of Virginia in preference to a 'shoppy' tale. It may be that the praise of chastity—this being, as it were, a bodily virtue—was regarded as particularly apt in a person whose character and accomplishments made him, in an unusual degree, sensible of its value. Unlike the previous story, which represents Chaucer's latest phase in composition, the *Doctor of Physic's Tale* is related, as regards both matter and manner, to the *Legend of Good Women*, especially to the *Legend of Lucrece*. Although Chaucer alludes to Livy, the piteous tragedy is completely modernized, and owes certain, not very acceptable, traits to the second part of the *Romance of the Rose*. The idea of Virginius bearing in his hand his daughter's head, which he has himself cut off, to the lustful and unrighteous Appius, is an addition Jean de Meung must have invented or inherited from the ages of barbarism. As a grave and observant person, the Doctor of Physic is not content with amusing his listeners. He solemnly appeals to governesses, who have charge of lords' daughters, as well as to parents, exhorting them to perform the shepherd's part with all diligence. Good example and chastisement are the methods he recommends. It is curious that he does not disapprove of women with tarnished reputations as governesses. They, he says, 'know the old dance,' and resemble deer-stealers, who can keep a forest better than any man.

The virtuous Doctor of Physic is succeeded by a vicious pardoner, who avows, and even revels, in his hypocrisies. He makes no concealment of the fact that he plies his blasphemous traffic purely for gain, and yet his one text, on which he

*The Pardoner's Tale.*



has preached many excellent sermons, is *Radix omnium malorum est cupiditas*. The gentlefolks are rather afraid of this man. They suspect that when he has drunk his draught of ale, he may offend them by his ribaldry. But, no! He regales them, instead, with a sample of his preaching. Herein, as in his unblushing frankness, he proves a worthy associate of the Wife of Bath. A large part of his tale is occupied by a digression aimed at the sins of gluttony, dicing, and profanity, to which his revelers are addicted. Having delivered his soul on these points, the pardoner proceeds with his interrupted narration. At Flanders three jolly companions sit drinking in a tavern, when they hear the clink of a bell carried before a corpse on its way to the grave. On inquiry they learn that an old acquaintance has fallen victim to the pestilence, whereupon they vow to slay 'this false traitor, Death,' who has slain his thousands—men, women, and children. Sallying forth towards a village in which he has wrought cruel loss, they come to a stile, where they are met by a poor old shrivelled man, close-wrapped save his face. He tells them that, go where he may, he can find none who will exchange youth for age. Death will not have his life. With his staff he knocks on the ground, his mother's gate, early and late, crying 'Dear mother, let me in,' but his cry passes unheeded. One of the dicers taxes him with being Death's ally, and demands to know the traitor's whereabouts. The old man bids them turn up a crooked way:

'For in that grove I left him, by my fay,  
Under a tree, and there he will abide.'

They arrive at the spot and find no living creature, but, as nearly as they can reckon, seven bushels of golden florins. Overjoyed at the discovery, they forget Death and

prepare to make merry. One of them—the youngest—is chosen by lot to return home for bread and wine, while the other two remain with the spoil. A diabolical thought now enters the mind of the eldest. If their absent companion is killed, there will be more florins for each of the survivors. They agree to murder him. Meanwhile the youngest is seized with a similar temptation. He fills three bottles with wine, and into two of them pours a strong poison obtained from an apothecary. Laden with these provisions he goes back to his fellows, and is immediately stabbed to death. The assassins then fall to eating and drinking, and perish of the swift poison.

This admirable fable is admirably told, for, happily, the digression occurs too early to affect the continuity of the story. From the mention of Flanders as the scene of the transactions it might be inferred that Chaucer derived the tale from some North French narrative, but it is possible that he fixed on the locality at random. Anyhow, the nearest approach to his version hitherto found is a tale in one of the editions of the *Cento Novelle Antiche*, from which collection he had already extracted hints for his *Merchant's Tale*. Perhaps Chaucer was thinking of the title of that work when he wrote, in the *Pardoner's Prologue*, about 'ensamples of *old stories*' and the love of ignorant people for old tales which they could well repeat and retain. The Italian version is much inferior to Chaucer's account. An ancient hermit, lighting on a hoard of gold in a forest-cave, whither he has gone to repose, fears to be molested by three lusty robbers, and runs away. Upon this they ask the reason of his flight, and he replies that Death chases him. Still perplexed, they beg him to show them his pursuer. Accordingly, he conducts them to the cave and its treasure. Chaucer's patriarch is far more mysterious and interesting. As one whom Death will not oblige,

he reminds us of Tithonus and the Wandering Jew. Life, for him, is continuance without fruition. The passions that will bring destruction on the insolent revellers are extinct in this world-weary spectre.

When the pardoner had come to the end of his tale, the host invited the parson to contribute a story. In so doing he slips out an oath, for which he is reproved by that good man.

*The Shipman's  
Tale.*

Bailey does not stomach correction, and intimates that he smells a Lollard. The result is that the parson forfeits his chance, and his place is taken by the irreverent sea-captain. This godless rascal relates a tale which, as a libel on womankind and caricature of wedlock, does not conduce to morality, though it may excuse the custom of gentle mariners, of whom it is said that they have a wife in every port. It is clear, however, that the story was not written for the shipman, since the opening lines contain several instances of the first person plural, and read as if uttered by a cynical dame with no opinion of her sex. Thus gross betrayal of confidence meets with no reprobation, and the moral that no woman, be she never so 'companionable' and 'reverent,' can be trusted, has for corollary that adultery is a very amusing and profitable game, provided that it is not found out. The sympathetic character of the monk, Don Johan, falsifies the issue, and we find ourselves congratulating him on his good fortune, instead of condemning his abominable treachery. The chief merit of the story lies in its splendid realism, one of the marks that distinguish Chaucer's latest style from the vague romanticism of Boccaccio, who, it should be noted, has treated the same motive in the *Decameron*.

The antidote is furnished by the prioress, whom the host approaches with courteous speech, and who gladly assents to tell the next story. Her recital is in marked

contrast to the preceding, commencing, as it does, with  
*The Prioress's Tale.* praise of the Maiden Mother and her Son,  
 and always upholding the glory of virginity. Nothing could excel the exquisite feeling, the tender pathos of this tale. The scene is laid somewhere in Asia, where Jews are encouraged to settle in order that the lord may profit by their base usury. A little chorister, the son of a widow, attends a Christian school, where he hears sung an anthem, *O alma Redemptoris*, referring to the Blessed Virgin. He asks an older companion to explain the Latin, but his friend can only tell him that it is a song made of Our Lady. Singing is his business, not 'grammar.' However, the young enthusiast resolves to learn the anthem, at all costs, before Christmas, and schoolward and homeward he practises, singing as he passes through the ghetto *O alma Redemptoris*. The Jews are scandalized. They hire a villain, who waylays the boy in an alley, seizes him, and, having cut his throat, casts him into a filthy pit. All night his mother waits for him, and, as he does not return, goes with the first streaks of dawn in search of the child. The Jews, through whose quarters he has passed, deny having seen him; but his whereabouts are revealed by the strain of *Alma Redemptoris*, which, though his throat is cut, he miraculously continues to sing. The provost is sent for, and the murderous Jews, in expiation of their crime, are drawn by wild horses and hanged. Meanwhile, the body of the chorister is conveyed to an adjoining abbey, and deposited before the high altar. Mass is said, and holy water sprinkled, but still the anthem rings—*O alma Redemptoris Mater*. The abbot, in perplexity, conjures the child, in the name of the Holy Trinity, to tell how he can sing with his throat cut to the neckbone. The body replies that Christ's mother came, and, placing a grain on his

tongue, bade him sing the anthem a-dying. The abbot removes the grain, and the singing ceases. Thereafter the body of the little martyr is inclosed in marble tomb. The tale concludes :

‘ O youngë Hugh of Lincoln, slain also  
 With cursèd Jews, as it is notable,  
 For it nis (*is not*) but a little while ago ;  
 Pray eke for us, we sinful folk unstable,  
 That of His mercy God so merciabie  
 On us His greatë mercy multiplyë  
 For reverence of His mother Maryë.’

Notwithstanding that the episodes are supposed to take place in Asia, it is safe to assume that the connexion between the *Prioress's Tale* and the story of Hugh of Lincoln is not so casual as the final stanza would infer. The *Fortalitium Fidei*, a work published in 1485, contains the legend of one Alphonsus of Lincoln, which differs from Chaucer's narrative only in immaterial details. St. Hugh, reputed to have been murdered by Jews in 1255, was one of several children, natives of various European countries, whom it was thought fit to canonize, for the same reason, as holy innocents. Chaucer was probably aware of this fact, which may have influenced him in altering the time and place of the tragedy.

The next story-teller is Chaucer himself. The host is evidently quite ignorant of his identity, and *Sir Thopas*. treats him as a nondescript mortal, somewhat out of place, whom it is his mission to discipline into good fellowship. The allusion to Chaucer's elf-like expression suitably preludes and, as it were, determines the tale which is to follow. Chaucer resolves to justify the man's phrenology. But this is not the whole of his purpose. The way in which the host addresses

him—bluff, familiar, contemptuous—would be more in order were he accosting a broken-down minstrel, a retailer of extravagant romance. This is the character Chaucer momentarily assumes, and by mimicking the outrageous incoherencies of popular rhyme, forces into effective contrast the ripe wisdom and rhythmic perfection of his own poetry. So far, however, as the *Canterbury Tales* are concerned, he preserves his *incognito*, taking refuge, when the jolting inanities of *Sir Thopas* draw upon him an avalanche of abuse, in the security of prose. Sir Thopas is a kind of forerunner of Don Quixote, who, though born in Flanders, hies over dale and down, into the Land of Faëry. He has set his heart on marrying an elf-queen, but meets with an obstacle in a giant whom he challenges to fight. By his constant appeals to lord and lady to listen to his tale, the narrator anticipates the 'closure' which finally overtakes him in the middle of a line. The six-line stanza of *Sir Thopas* is an ideal doggerel verse on account of the unavoidable prominence of the rhymes. The lines are short, and the quickly recurring need of a similar ending tempts to nonsense or half-sense—at best, superfluity. The effect on the ear may be compared to that of a steam 'round-about' with its raucous, grinding iteration of a street air, and it is scarcely a lessening—rather it is an aggravation of the evil—when an impertinent linelet of only two syllables necessitates another turn of the screw.

(The *Tale of Melibeus*, which Chaucer substitutes for his interrupted romance, has been already dealt with in the chapter on prose.)

The two efforts the poet permits to himself may be considered to prepare the way for a notable departure from the course hitherto pursued. Till now each of the narrators has been content with a single tale. The monk, however, informs the company

*The Monk's  
Tale.*

that he has in his cell no fewer than a hundred tragedies, besides other trifles, such as the *Life of Saint Edward*, all which are at the service of the pilgrims. He first defines tragedy as 'a certain story' of one who, after enjoying great prosperity, falls from his high estate and ends miserably. This premised, he sets out to describe, in such order as he may, the catastrophes of Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Zenobia, Pedro of Spain, Pierre de Lusignan, Bernabo Visconti, Count Ugolino, Nero, Holophernes, Alexander, Julius Cæsar, Croesus. The *Monk's Tale* represents, in fragmentary outline, an ambitious scheme which Chaucer himself must once have entertained. It is significant that the monk speaks of a century of tragedies, one of which, at any rate, was derived from the *Divine Comedy*. Now the *Divine Comedy* consists of a hundred cantos. It is tolerably evident, therefore, that, during his Italian period, Chaucer nourished the hope of rivalling that great masterpiece. As regards the general idea and subject-matter, there existed an Italian precedent in Boccaccio's Latin work, *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*. The *Monk's Tale* is not a finished composition, like Petrarch's *Triumphs*, but is composed rather of more or less imperfect jottings penned at various intervals, and now strung together with specious irregularity, to mark the abandonment of the original design. The biblical and classical tragedies belong to that phase of Chaucer's development when he was still under the spell of authority. The four 'modern instances' appear to have been added after the inception of the *Canterbury Tales*, and to these we turn for proofs of intellectual freedom. Unhappily, the first three are merely allusive—a result due, perhaps, to lack of precise information. The absurd laudation of Pedro the Cruel is obviously inspired by the consideration that this monarch was aliy



of the Black Prince and father-in-law of John of Gaunt. Bernabo, on the other hand, receives his deserts. The best of the whole cycle is the story of Ugolino, which, as Chaucer himself implies, has been taken from the *Inferno*:

' Whoso will hear it in a longer wise,  
Readeth the great poetë of Itail  
That hightë Dante, for he can all devise  
From point to point, not one word will he fail.'

These lines are suggestive. Although Chaucer has the main incidents in his mind, particulars, such as the names of Ugolino's children, are wanting. Dante, moreover, mentions four children, while in the monk's 'tragedy' there are only three. These discrepancies may be accounted for by supposing that Chaucer had not consulted his copy of the *Inferno*, if he had any, very lately. But the fact is that the two poets tell the ghastly tale in entirely different ways. Dante relates the particulars by the mouth of Ugolino, and Ugolino simply describes his experiences. When the recital is ended, Dante, as auditor, throws in his passionate comment. Chaucer, on the contrary, through his monk, speaks as one to whom the story is familiar, and who is penetrated with a sense of its horror and pathos. He slights unimportant details, and makes the most of circumstances calculated to strike the imagination and the heart.

The story of Ugolino is a black episode arising out of the unbridled fury, the pitiless rancour of mediæval Italian party feuds. According to Villani, Ugolino was by no means exempt from the restless suspicion, the jealousy and malice that centre in, and circle around, the unscrupulous attainment and overbearing exercise of power—the sort of spirit the old Greeks called *πλεονεξία* and modern Italians brand as *prepotenza*. The Count, indeed, as crown of many

acts of treachery, had poisoned his sister's son from envy of his amiable manners. Neither Dante nor Chaucer, however, chooses to represent Ugolino in his true colours. To do so would be to impair the effect of the story, in which he appears the victim of 'false suggestion' and outraged father. Imprisoned with his three sons—Villani says two sons and two grandsons—in a tower, he is condemned to see them die, and to die himself, of starvation. It is the same awful situation that is created sometimes by a wreck at sea, intensified by the intimate relations of the sufferers :

'His youngë son that three year was of age,  
Unto him said, "Father, why do ye weep?  
When will the jailer bringen our potage?  
Is there no morsel bread that ye do keep?  
I am so hungry that I may not sleep.  
Now wouldë God that I might sleepë ever!  
Then should not hunger in my wombë creep.  
There is no thing save bread that me were lever.'

The multiplication of 'tragedies' is not to the taste of the company. The knight expresses a healthy sentiment, which one would like to think characteristic of Englishmen, in declaring that it is vexatious to hear of the downfall of people, and gladsome to hail their prosperity. Here perhaps we have the explanation of Chaucer's forsaking a scheme he found on experiment out of harmony with his own kindly nature. His disciple Lydgate, however, was not so sensitive, and the chief literary performance of the next generation was the *Fall of Princes*, in the prologue of which the writer alludes to the *Monk's Tale* by that name.

As the monk declines to vary his note, the Nuns' Priest is desired to revive the spirits of the party. This he does in a humorous apologue concerning a cock and a fox.

It is noticeable that the doleful tone of the tragedies is parodied in this sprightly comedy, based perhaps on a *lai* of Marie of France, though the vicissitudes of Reynard were so common a topic of mediæval fabulists as to render the immediate source uncertain. Chanticleer, a fine specimen of a bird and governor of seven hens, is much upset by an ominous dream. He has seen in a vision a beast like a dog, of a colour 'twixt red and yellow, tail and ears tipped with black, snout sleeker, eyes glowing—a mortal enemy who would fain take and slay him. The fair Pertelot, his favourite wife, blames him for his cowardice, whereupon Chanticleer recounts certain stories showing that it is unsafe to neglect such tokens. However, he regains his confidence, and is waylaid by a fox. He is on the point of flying, but Reynard reassures him, tells him that he admires his voice, and instructs him to sing standing on tip-toe, with his neck stretched and eyes shut. In this attitude he is seized by the fox, who bears him off to the wood. At once the hens raise great lamentation, which occasions a general hue and cry. The widow and her two daughters, to whom the yard and its occupants belong, set off in pursuit, and are joined by their neighbours, both human and otherwise. Coll, and Talbot, and Garland, like good dogs, are soon on Reynard's track, and, to add to the confusion, the terrified hogs yell like fiends in hell. The cock, in his extremity, bids the fox turn and defy the proud churls. Reynard falls into the trap, and out of his mouth pops Chanticleer, who flies aloft into a tree. The fox begs him to come down, when he will explain his conduct. But 'No,' says the cock:

'Thou shalt no morë, through thy flattery,  
Do me to sing and winkë with mine eye.'

As Chaucer tells it, the story is remarkable as a travesty of human life and human interests. Chanticleer is not a fowl of the nursery book, but a very intelligent and highly civilized person, whom fate has consigned to the poultry yard. The other personages, though less learned, are much above their station in the scale of creation. It is hardly possible, however, that Chaucer had any *arrière pensée*. More probably the poem is pure comedy in contrast with the pure tragedy that has gone before. Wit alternates with a certain 'elvishness' manifested in the frivolous introduction of points which claim serious treatment. Of the former quality a good specimen is Chanticleer's prudence in translating:

'For also siker (*as sure*) as *In principio*  
*Mulier est hominis confusio*.  
 (Madame, the sentence of this Latin is,  
 Woman is mannës joy and mannës bliss).'

'Elvishness' shows itself in the passage where the cock is reproached for flying from his perch into the yard, after being warned of the peril.

'But what that God forewot must needës be,  
 After the opinion of certain clerks,'

says Chaucer, and incontinently refers to Bishop Bradwardine, the 'Profound Doctor,' who had survived to Chaucer's own days, and whose treatise *De Causa Dei* the poet had already quoted in his *Troilus*. The daring conceit of importing God, a venerable English divine, and the 'great disputation' of Fate and Freewill into the trumpery concerns of a family of fowls is an instance of clerical fun. Truly, as Luther observes, the Gospel is altogether joyful.

At the conclusion of the priest's tale, it was found that

The cook had fallen dangerously in the rear, where he stood a chance of being molested by highwaymen. The host therefore deemed it wise to bring him forward and compel him to tell a tale. He is found, however, too drunken and sleepy for such a purpose—in fact, he can barely sit his mare—so the manciple obligingly takes his place. The virtualler borrows a story from Ovid about Phœbus, the lewd infatuation of his worthless wife, and the murderous consequences of tale-bearing. A white crow, who could sing better than any nightingale and talk withal, witnesses the crime and acquaints Phœbus, who kills the fair sinner and breaks in pieces all his instruments of minstrelsy. On recovering from his frenzy, he wreaks resentment on the bird, plucks out his white feathers, and deprives him of speech and song. There is a depressing passage on the injustice that characterizes human affairs, more especially marriage; and the story concludes with words of homely wisdom learnt by the manciple from his ‘dame.’ The crow is black now; his voice, harsh and displeasing. He is an eternal symbol of the folly of tittle-tattle:

‘Whereso thou comest, amongst high or low,  
Keep well thy tongue, and think upon the crow.’

The series ends with the *Parson's Tale*, to which attention has been given in the section on prose. He, at least, is worthy of his calling, for he shows

‘The way, in this viage,  
Of thilke perfect glorious pilgrimage  
That hight Jerusalem celestial.’

Meanwhile, how went it with Chaucer's earthly pilgrimage? Of necessity there are two sides of a man's life—the private and the public; and it is not to be supposed

that the poet was spared the uncertainty and suspense which is the common lot. Indeed, his ups and downs seem to mark unusual celerity in the revolutions of Fortune's wheel. To the ills that afflicted him Chaucer appears to have contributed by lack of probity and prudence. In 1380 one Cecilia Chaumpaigne formally released him from all liability *meo raptu*. We do not know the particulars of this affair, but it is unpleasant to find Chaucer participating in an attempt—this is the most likely explanation of the business—to force a young lady into marriage against her mind. Seven years later he probably lost his wife;—any rate, we have no further record of her pension being paid to her. Some light is thrown on his domestic life, after her decease, by the introduction to his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*. This is as delightful as the treatise itself is dry, being addressed to ‘little Lewis, my son.’ Chaucer may or may not have been an affectionate husband, but he was clearly a tender parent. What an odd way, however, he took to demonstrate his affection! This complex astronomical disc was assuredly no ‘bread and milk for children,’ but ‘strong meat’ for grown-up readers of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Outwardly, much depended on the ascendancy of John of Lancaster. If the Duke of Lancaster prospered, Chaucer prospered with him. When the Duke of Gloucester was uppermost, the poet's sky was overcast, and he had hard work to keep himself afloat. In 1386 he was affluent enough to sit in Parliament as knight of the shire for Kent. Then followed reverses, but in 1389 there was a turn of the tide, and Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the King's Works, an office for which he drew two shillings a day, with leave to employ a deputy. In the following March he was named one of the commissioners for the repairs of

the roads on the river-banks between Greenwich and Woolwich; and soon afterwards, perhaps, succeeded to the forestership of North Petherton Park, in Somerset. However, he again fell into misfortune, and in a poem addressed to his friend Scogan speaks of himself as 'forgot in solitary wilderness.' Scogan appears to have had interest at Court, and possibly through his mediation Richard II. came to the rescue with a fresh pension of twenty pounds. This, however, was not sufficient to save him from embarrassment. Creditors pressed, and royal letters of protection were obtained to hold them at bay. On the accession of Henry IV., Chaucer addressed to that monarch *A Complaint to his Empty Purse*. This hint led to the bestowal of a pension of forty marks over and above that for which he was indebted to the late king; and, at last, Chaucer seems to have found himself in smooth water. In December, 1399, he took a house in the garden of St. Mary's, Westminster, for a term of fifty-three years. Ten months later he died, and was buried in St. Benet's Chapel in Westminster Abbey. The date of his death is known to us only from a marble tombstone erected to his memory in 1556, which, however, probably replaced an older monument fallen into decay. A stained-glass window, emblematic of his life and achievements, was erected over against his grave by Dean Stanley, in 1868; and on the five hundredth anniversary of his death a memorial window to 'the first great English poet' was unveiled by the present Poet-Laureate in the Collegiate Church of St. Saviour, Southwark.

In estimating Chaucer's position as a writer, the first point with which it seems necessary to deal is the charge many entertain, if they do not openly allege—that, after all, he is a mere imitator, that he has no true gift of

Chaucer's Position  
as a Writer.



originality. The frequent references we have been compelled to make, and they are by no means exhaustive, to Chaucer's sources, cannot but raise the problem to what extent such obligations are admissible, and how far they may consist with practical independence. Here, then, it is requisite to distinguish between mechanical appropriation and spiritual assimilation involving, it may be, verbal reminiscence. That Chaucer was never guilty of mechanical appropriation we dare not aver, but the ratio between slavish imitation and free reproduction, or masterly recasting, was constantly varying, and always in favour of the latter. Lest, however, this defence may seem inadequate, it may be worth while to cite the verdict of a wise philosopher—Emerson :

‘A great poet, who appears in illiterate times, absorbs into his sphere all the light which is anywhere radiating. Every intellectual jewel, every flower of sentiment, it is his fine office to bring to his people, and he comes to value his memory equally with his invention. He is therefore little solicitous whence his thoughts have been derived ; whether through translation, whether through tradition, whether by travel in distant countries, whether by inspiration ; from whatever source, they are equally welcome to his uncritical audience. . . . The influence of Chaucer is conspicuous in all our early literature ; and, more recently, not only Pope and Dryden have been beholden to him, but in the whole society of English writers a large unacknowledged debt is easily traced. One is charmed with the opulence which feeds so many pensioners. But Chaucer is a huge borrower. . . . He steals by this apology—that what he takes has no worth where he finds it, and the greatest where he leaves it. It has come to be practically a sort of rule in literature, that a man, having once shown himself capable of original writing, is entitled thenceforth to steal from the writings of others at discretion. Thought is the property of him who can entertain it, and of him who can adequately place it. A certain awkwardness marks the use of borrowed thoughts ; but, as soon


as we have learned what to do with them, they become our own.'

In his discourse at the unveiling of the Chaucer window at Southwark Church, Mr. Alfred Austin seemed to advocate the theory that Chaucer, holding a brief for conduct, made of his poetry a handmaid of virtue, a nurse of good morals. This doctrine conflicts with the present writer's opinion, according to which Chaucer never grasped the idea of duty, as the stern, perhaps solitary, fulfilling of what is right. Virtue to him was not something binding on the conscience, but that which was socially convenient and attractive—the 'good fair White'—in other words, a sort of higher etiquette accepted by a few. How else explain the composition of poems, the tendency of which is the reverse of edifying? The truth is, Chaucer had a taste and relish, an eye and understanding for many things in human nature, from which the ideal moralist turns away with horror and indignation. Chaucer, on the contrary, with perfect complacency, takes the world as he finds it, and, like a practised harmonist, extracts from its jarring discords an infinity of pleasing strains. Even this hardly states the case. Chaucer is the most irresponsible of men. The obligations of morality sit so lightly on him that they have become a theory of which he sometimes reminds himself, but which has no real influence on his poetical procedure. In his capacity as poet he is a mirror, an *Æolian harp*, a faithful amanuensis of Phœbus, who tweaks his ear and bids him write for the diversion of a weary world.

One of the first essentials for such a mission was the conquest of rhythm. The lay or casual reader will entirely fail to comprehend Chaucer's mastery of verse, for the simple reason that Time has wrought the same havoc on his writings as on the statuary of our old cathedrals.

Patience and study, however, not necessarily prolonged, will bring their reward in appreciation of one of the most tunable of bards, who, singing in an age when English was not so poor in inflexions, could smooth and sweeten his verse with the aid of end-vowels. Rhyming also, in spite of his confessions, appears to have been no great trouble to him.

But the supreme charm of Chaucer's poetry, after all, is the revelation it affords of a gracious personality that shines through and suffuses every line. The mild yet manly note, the transforming sympathy, the signal absence of bigotry and partisanship make up a pattern of courtesy, of humanity never more needed than in that brutal, cynical, and ignorant age, and not superfluous to-day. It is this warmth of feeling, this wealth of observation that furnish Chaucer with what was long since recognized as his dominant characteristic—namely, his dramatic quality. That Chaucer did not adopt the form of the drama is an accident that may be safely attributed to temporal conditions. Born in the fourteenth century, when the drama signified the buffoonery of the miracle plays, the fashion of his youth led him away from his true *milieu*. But the shrewdness, the knowledge of the world, the knowledge of the human heart, the power of realizing and depicting feelings the most various, the most opposed, that constitute the play—these high and happy gifts were united in Chaucer as in none of his contemporaries, and lie at the root of the perennial freshness, the undying popularity of the *Canterbury Tales*.



NOTE TO PAGE 166.

Professor Skeat considers that Chaucer's words in the Prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, 'thogh the storye ys knowen lyte,' merely echo Boccaccio's lines:

'una storia antica,  
Tanto negli anni riposta e nascosa,  
Che Latino autor non par ne dica,  
Per quel ch' io senta, in libro alcuna cosa.'

We are bound to admit that, in all probability, the clause in question is a reminiscence of the longer statement, but in reaffirming it, Chaucer clearly implies that his own version of the story has done little to redeem it from oblivion. It may be added that many now incline to the belief that the allusion is not to any lost poem, but to the *Knight's Tale*, which, in that case, must have been written before the *Legend of Good Women*.

NOTE TO PAGE 198.

Mr. Pollard suggests that the Shipman did not, as Prof. Skeat explains, make off with casks from Bordeaux, but during the homeward voyage from that port, privily broached those which, as well as the Chapman, he had on board.



## CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE.

- 1346. Battle of Neville's Cross. Battle of Crécy.
- 1349. Death of Richard Rolle of Hampole. The First Great Pestilence. Order of the Garter instituted.
- 1352. *Polychronicon*, by Ralph Higden. *Poems concerning Edward III.*, by Lawrence Minot,
- 1355. Scots surprise Berwick. *William of Palerne*, or *William the Werwolf* (?).
- 1356. Battle of Poitiers. Maundeville's *Voyage and Travel*.
- 1357. Chaucer a page to the wife of Prince Lionel (?).
- 1359. Edward III. invades France. Chaucer taken prisoner.
- 1360 (c.). Alliterative Poems in MS. Cotton, Nero A. x. *Morte Arthur*, in alliterative verse. The *Geste Historial of the Destruction of Troy*, by the same author. *Gawayne and the Green Knight*.
- 1361. The Second Great Pestilence. Chaucer probably in the service of Edward II.
- 1362. *Piers Plowman* (*A-text*), by William Langland.
- 1366. *Romaunt of the Rose*, by Geoffrey Chaucer (?).
- 1367. Chaucer receives an annual pension of twenty marks. *Complaint to Pity* (?).
- 1369. The Third Great Pestilence. Chaucer's *Death of Blanche the Duchess*.
- 1371. Accession of Robert II. of Scotland.
- 1372. Chaucer sent as envoy to Pisa and Genoa.
- 1373. Chaucer's *Life of St. Oecily*.
- 1374. Grant to Chaucer of a pitcher of wine daily. Chaucer appointed Comptroller of the Customs and Subsidy of Wool. Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars* (?). Death of Petrarch.
- 1375. *The Bruce*, by John Barbour. Death of Boccaccio.
- 1376. Death of Edward the Black Prince.
- 1377. Death of Edward III. and Accession of Richard II.

Chaucer sent on a mission to France. Chaucer's *Boece* (?). *Piers Plowman* (B-text). Wyclif condemned by Papal bull.

- 1370-80. *Translation of the Bible*, by Wyclif and others.
- 1381. Wat Tyler's Rebellion.
- 1382. Chaucer appointed Comptroller of the Petty Customs. Chaucer's *Troilus* (?).
- 1384. Death of Wyclif. Chaucer's *House of Fame* (?).
- 1385. Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* (?).
- 1386. Chaucer dismissed from his offices of Comptroller of Wool and of the Petty Customs. Chaucer's *Truth* (?).
- 1387. Translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*, by John of Trevisa. Some *Canterbury Tales*. Death of Chaucer's wife.
- 1389. Chaucer appointed Clerk of the King's Works at Westminster.
- 1390. Robert III. of Scotland. Chaucer appointed Clerk of the Works at Windsor. Chaucer robbed of twenty pounds of the king's money. Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (first edition).
- 1390-1. Chaucer appointed Joint-Forester of North Petherton, Somerset.
- 1391. Chaucer's *Astrolabe*.
- 1393. *Confessio Amantis* (second edition).
- 1393-4. *Piers Plowman* (C-text).
- 1394. Pension of twenty pounds for life granted to Chaucer. *Pierce the Ploughman's Creed* (?).
- 1395. Persecution of Lollards. Death of Barbour. *The Complaint of the Ploughman, or the Plowman's Tale*, by the author of the *Creed* (?).
- 1392-8. Certain of Chaucer's *Minor Poems*.
- 1397-8. Chaucer appointed sole Forester of North Petherton Somerset. Chaucer sued for fourteen pounds.
- 1398. Grant to Chaucer of a tun of wine annually.
- 1399. Accession of Henry IV. Chaucer sends his *Complaint to his Empty Purse* to Henry IV. Chaucer's pension doubled. Death of John of Gaunt. *Richard the Redeless*, by Langland.
- 1400. Death of Chaucer.



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